unicorns, and other extinct animals

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/55957471.

Rating:
Explicit

Archive Warning:
No Archive Warnings Apply

Category:
M/M

Fandom:
Masters of the Air (TV 2024)

Relationship:
Gale "Buck" Cleven/John Clarence "Bucky" Egan

Characters:
Gale "Buck" Cleven, John Clarence "Bucky" Egan

Additional Tags:
Idiots in Love, Mutual Pining, Getting Together, this starts in ep1 and follows them through the postwar era, First Kiss, First Time, Post-War, Post-Canon, Love Confessions, Period-Typical Homophobia, though it is largely only alluded to and fairly brief and from neither of the buckies, POV Gale "Buck" Cleven, Angst with a Happy Ending, Перевод на русский | Translation in Russian

Language:
English

Series:
Part 1 of Synchronicity

Stats:
Published: 2024-05-16 Words: 25,776 Chapters: 1/1

unicorns, and other extinct animals

by mercess

Summary

The first letter Gale gets from Bucky is about a unicorn.

Gale's used to John rambling when he's drunk, usually while hanging off one arm hooked around Gale's shoulders, but there's a different note to his written word. When he's drunk in person, he likes to pester Gale with questions, get Gale to talk about himself. When it's just John and a pen, it seems he simply shares every little thought that crosses his mind.

He lets the letter close on its own again, staring down at his eggs until he hears "Good morning, Major!" from outside the mess hall. Hurriedly, Gale tucks the letter back into its envelope and the envelope into the pocket of his trousers. By the time the doors swing open, John sauntering in like he owns the base and the mess and the doors themselves, Gale's sure all knowledge of John's words—of that lipstick print pressed onto paper beside John's name—has been wiped from his face.

All the same, he can't resist taking a peek. John's walking on air. Gale smiles.

Notes

Hi y'all! I posted the other day on tumblr about Bucky having canonically sent Gale at least one (1) letter: to bring that box with the unicorn to the sergeant in the Greenland bar. That one little jokey post has since crossed the Channel and dropped a bomb on me, and as a result you get this fic. It's far longer than I planned. Bon appétit.

Also, this isn't epistolary, but it does contain a good deal of letters.

See the end of the work for more notes

- Translation into Русский available: Единороги и другие вымершие животные by Linda_0210

The first letter arrives with all the fanfare of a bomb. Gale, being half-asleep and hunched over the table in the mess, mechanically spooning dry scrambled eggs into his mouth without really tasting them, doesn't notice the private stopped by his table until the white envelope lands by his plate, dropped not unlike a used tissue.

"Sorry, Major Cleven," the private says. "It arrived a couple days ago, but I only just noticed. Hopefully it's nothing urgent."

Gale just mumbles his thanks and the private fades away into the background noise of the subdued mess hall full of airmen blinking away cobwebs. Gale slips his thumb beneath the flap without looking at the return address, tugs the letter free of its trappings, and spends several long seconds simply blinking at the salutation. The handwriting is familiar, but not because he's gotten letters from John before. It's familiar because John never did meet a chalkboard he wouldn't write something on. Usually his own name, but often Gale's, too, and games of hangman with ridiculous answers no one ever guessed, and words of the day with incorrect definitions and too many exclamation points. Gale got used to wiping chalk dust off John's lapels before every inspection, when John was too hungover to notice the forest for the trees.

So to see that handwriting here in blue ink, scrawled across white paper neatly folded and creased into thirds, is a bit unusual. Not unwelcome, but it makes Gale feel like he should apologize to Marge and her friend for preemptively saying John isn't the type to write letters. Evidently he will, at least if they're to Gale. It's been three weeks since John shipped off to England to risk his neck without Gale there to ensure his head stays where it's supposed to. Gale hasn't been keeping track of the days, except for when he has.

Dear Buck it starts, because not even here will John use any name that he didn't give Gale himself, and Gale has given up on trying to change that. These days, it simply feels weird if someone says "Gale" rather than "Buck." He's not sure that's a good thing.

Dear Buck,

This will be short and sweet because the war waits for no one etc. etc. and I've got an early flight tomorrow, and it'd be a waste of my precious beauty sleep to explain why I'm writing this letter so I'm not going to explain. You remember that weird little antique shop we found when we had the day pass a few months back, with the leg lamp in the window and that curio

cabinet full of rocks you spent too much time looking at? You bought Marge that shiny chicken figurine because you said its face reminded you of my face. (I still don't know why you gave it to Marge. She ever say anything about that? Meant to ask and forgot.)

I need you to do me a favor. If you tell the owner you're there for me, he'll give you the thing I ordered. Whatever you do, do not open the box. You don't want to know what's in there. There was an…incident, so I need you to bring that box to Greenland and give it to the sergeant who runs the bar on the base. He'll know what it's about if you say it's from me.

It's cold and windy and not really green here. Do you know who named it Greenland? I'd like a word with them.

Fly fast and take chances!

Bucky

It's with something reminiscent of whiplash that Gale lets the letter drop to the table. He has a million questions, but then, that's his modus operandi as John's friend. He finishes his breakfast and his coffee, then rereads the letter to see if it makes more sense. It doesn't, not really, but he already knows he'll be heeding John's request. He can only finagle a half-day pass, but it's long enough for Gale to bike into town and collect the box, neatly taped shut. Something thuds about when he shakes it by his ear, but he dutifully doesn't open it.

Then he sits down at the little desk in the room he used to share with John and pens a letter. He's not sure if it'll make it to England before Gale does, but stranger things have happened. (After all, he and John are friends.)

Dear Bucky is how he starts it, because Dear John letters are something of a bad omen in the army, even if they've yet to spread beyond its borders. Gale's hardly a dame breaking up with her soldier, but it feels weird to even entertain the notion of writing *Dear John*, so he doesn't.

Dear Bucky,

I had no idea you knew how to hold a pen, let alone put it to paper! Will wonders never cease? I've already apologized to Marge for telling her you're not the letter-writing type. She thinks maybe I'm just special.

Anyway, I picked up your box and, as requested, did not open it. Hopefully there's nothing alive in it, but given nothing made a noise when I shook it

around, I'll trust it's not some poor cat you've decided needs to be rehomed to Greenland.

On the topic of Greenland, I looked up who named it for you: According to the Icelandic sagas, Erik the Red, a Viking who was exiled to Iceland for murder, named it Greenland because he hoped it would attract settlers. It must have worked, considering people are there now. I'll take your word for it not being green.

I'm not sure if this letter will find you before I do, but if I'm about to be part of a new chapter of the Icelandic sagas, I want it known I do not approve of murder.

Hugs and kisses,

Buck

# # #

Gale crouches in the waist of *Wild Cargo* after limping back to Thorpe Abbotts, bombs dropped uselessly into the Channel, and all he can think about are unicorns. "Unicorns are my favorite extinct animal," John had said, serious as a heart attack. Butter wouldn't have melted in his mouth.

The engines tick as they cool in the brisk English air. The ground crew's voices filter through the quiet, muffled save for when they get too close to a flak hole. Trucks rumble past, loaded with airmen lucky enough to escape with limbs intact. Gale knows he needs to get out, join his men, sit down for interrogation, but he can't bring himself to unfold from this envelope of aluminum. *Return to sender* he imagines the face of it proclaiming in faded ink.

Sun shines on his face, blinding, and it's only now that he realizes he thought, for a moment, he'd never feel warmth again. At least, not this kind, the kind that doesn't make you scream. He knows from the panicked radio chatter—the words rambled into ears, begging to be made sense of, before Huglin put a stop to it and told them to save it for interrogation—that the three planes went up in flames. No chutes were spotted. Thirty men lost.

Gale came out of this first mission more or less unscathed, and he didn't even see those three forts go up, too trapped in clouds as they were, miles behind the group. But sitting here, looking at the cloudy sky through the flak holes in the belly of Curt's B-17, he starts to wonder if surviving the war might be as likely as seeing a unicorn.

What are bodies of mere flesh and blood to flak that can tear a plane apart? Dandelion fluff to a hurricane.

He's quiet on the drive back to the base, and John doesn't try to break the silence. He's quiet through interrogation, sipping coffee, Curt's arm propped on his shoulder. He's quiet as he visits Bosser and Dickie in the infirmary, and quiet as he folds himself into the chair at the table in his barracks to type out a letter to Harding. Gale isn't sure what he can do to help the men survive this war beyond keeping the yoke steady, making sure the plane gets there and back in one piece—this envelope of aluminum damaged but, if he's lucky, whole enough to endure the return to sender—but he knows he doesn't want to do it without John.

"I should've been up there with you," John said, and all Gale can think is, *Maybe you're the unicorn in our war, John*. Maybe, if John's there with Gale, leading the men the way he's always done—his voice warm and steady in the comms, reading Gale's mind through every little fleck of inflection in Gale's voice—they'll survive it. They're better together, a matching set, a pair of cats with the warning "Do not separate" on the front of their cage.

A private finds Gale while he's sitting a seat away from Jack in the officer's mess, washing dry eggs down with weak coffee. When the private sets the envelope by Gale's plate, seeming as confused by the lack of stamp and return address as Gale is, Gale grunts out a "Thanks" and brushes his thumb over the familiar handwriting. It's addressed to "Buck Cleven," so even if he hadn't recognized the looping scrawl of John's blue pen, he'd know this isn't supposed to be something official.

Jack doesn't look up from his breakfast. Gale doesn't offer an explanation as he breaks the seal and tugs the letter free. It's folded in thirds that are just slightly uneven, and each crease is heavy, like John dragged his fingernail over the folds to make them lay flat. But what surprises him is the red lipstick print on the bottom, right beside the curlicue of John's signature. Gale's cheeks go hot, though he's not sure why. Jack still hasn't looked up. It's early enough few officers have joined them in the mess. The servers are more occupied with folding napkins around cutlery. No one's paying attention to Gale, and yet it feels like everyone's going to see…*something*.

Looking away and letting the paper fold shut on its own, Gale clears his throat and takes another bite of eggs. It sticks in his throat. The coffee doesn't help. The lipstick print is still there when he presses the

letter flat.

Dear Buck,

I'm drunk! Curt remains as sinister with finding booze as he's always been. There's a reason I like him, you know? Boozy little Biddick. (Okay, that's not the only reason I like him. You know that. I know that. He knows that.)

Anyway, I'm drunk! So forgive any typos or rambles etc. Also, we stole lipstick and Curt says I look pretty. Do you think I look pretty? I'm realizing now that there's no way you could see me, considering you're snug as a bug in your rack while Curt and I howl at the moon, so just take Curt's word for it. I'm pretty! Here, I'll smear a little bit in the margins. Pretty color, isn't it?

I meant to write this letter while you were in the air to give to you when you landed—insurance, you know? If I never gave it to you, you'd have to make it back, same as you taking my lucky deuce up there without me. (Curt's surprised I know how to apply lipstick already, and I reminded him I have a sister, but I'll tell you a little secret: I practiced so I could kiss that two-dollar bill for you. Who's got better luck than me?) But I stared at the sky instead, so now you're stuck with drunk me. At least that's par for the course. (God, I hate golf.)

There's no point to this letter. There probably was one, but I've forgotten it, so now I'm just saying hi. Hi! We're glad you're still with us!

That little smear is all smudged now. Whoops. Here, I'll kiss the letter. You gave me a hug and a kiss last time, so here's me returning the favor.

Bucky

P.S. Thank you for the explanation about Greenland. I know I already said thanks when you got here, and already opined on the trickery (you say I'm just sore I didn't come up with it first, and to that I say, once again, not by the hair of my chinny-chin-chin), but I'm thinking about it again. Next time I'm in London, I'm going to find a bookstore and look for a book about Erik the Red. And if I can't find one about him, about Vikings. What are we if not Vikings, Buck? Up in the sky, wreaking havoc.

It seems I'm getting to the philosophical stage of my drunken tomfoolery, so I bid you adieu. I gotta meet with that goddamn new C.O. this morning. Curt's reminded me it's already morning, so I'm probably running late. Do you think he'll notice I'm drunk?

P.P.S. I have no idea if I'll remember writing this in the morning (yes, yes, I know, it's already morning, the sun's up, cock-a-doodle-doo amen), so remind me if I said anything particularly clever, will you? My thoughts are worth so much more than a fucking penny.

By the end of the letter, each word is tiny, nearly overlapping with the one above and below it as John ran out of room. They're almost not legible, but Gale stares until his eyes hurt, piecing each vowel from the consonants surrounding it. He's used to John rambling when he's drunk, usually while hanging off one arm hooked around Gale's shoulders, but there's a different note to his written word. When he's drunk in person, he likes to pester Gale with questions, get Gale to talk about himself. When it's just John and a pen, it seems he simply shares every little thought that crosses his mind.

He lets the letter close on its own again, staring down at his eggs until he hears "Good morning, Major!" from outside the mess hall. Hurriedly, Gale tucks the letter back into its envelope and the envelope into the pocket of his trousers. By the time the doors swing open, John sauntering in like he owns the base and the mess and the doors themselves, Gale's sure all knowledge of John's words—of that lipstick print pressed onto paper beside John's name—has been wiped from his face.

All the same, he can't resist taking a peek. John's walking on air. Gale smiles.

# # #

"You never wrote me back," John says after he's returned Curt to the earth and his arm to Gale's shoulders, the whole of them staggering back to Thorpe Abbotts in various stages of drunkenness. Croz and Bubbles seem the most sober, though that's not saying much, since Croz and Bubbles tend to giggle, heads ducked, sober or not. Veal strolls along, stone-faced, and Jack herds everyone like a border collie does sheep, stoic no matter how loudly Curt demands his recap to the two seconds that fight lasted.

Gale and John follow at the back. Jack glances over his shoulder on occasion, as if to make sure they're still there, but he has to know Gale is sober as a sunrise. Perhaps he's simply checking to make sure Gale doesn't return to challenge any other Brits to a fight for calling John out on his habit of heavy-petting.

The first time John clapped his paw to Gale's thigh, barely a month

into their friendship, Gale nearly leaped out of his own skin. It wasn't an unpleasant touch, nor an unwelcome one, but certainly a surprise. He wasn't used to other people touching him, and certainly not other men. But John has never been shy a day in his life, and so when his big hand closed on Gale's thigh—a flag plunged into earth, declaring Gale's right leg Johnsland, New Johnsington, the Island of Johnwashereandyouwerenot—Gale looked at him out of the corner of his eye and couldn't help a smile. John didn't even seem to notice, though the hand came and went through the night. It was always a friendly pat, there on the space above his knee.

Not every man was comfortable with it. Gale got used to watching the men John befriended on any given night, waiting for a telltale twitch at the corner of their eye that said they didn't like John touching them. As if a man touching another man in a friendly way was somehow bad, or wrong. If any men started to look too twitchy, Gale would redirect John's attention to himself. He didn't care what the men thought of him, but he'd be damned before he let them hurt John —before they made John feel guilty for being who he is.

Gale never said it as plainly to the men in the Hundredth, the fact he would protect John's right to be John with tooth and claw (and bomber and bomb) if need be, but they're all good men. He needn't have worried. John touched them and they didn't mind. Many of them, certainly their closest friends, would simply return the favor. Curt likes to fling his legs over the lap of anyone who's sitting near him when he's in his cups. Croz and Bubbles sometimes link arms when it's late at night and they feel safe to show the closeness of their friendship. Veal has a habit of closing his thick fingers around the shoulders of anyone in proximity to him. Brady hardly needs an excuse to knock shoulders and elbows. And Gale is always happy to act as John's mantelpiece.

Now, he glances at John sideways. The shadows are long as they walk down the dark, tree-lined streets back to base, leaving voices and laughter and singing behind. "What?" Gale asks.

"My letter," John says. "You never replied."

Gale flicks his tongue over the tip of his toothpick. "Didn't realize you wanted one."

"The point of sending a letter is to get a reply, Buck. Didn't Marge teach you that?" He glances at him sideways, scratching the bridge of his nose. "Don't tell me she hasn't gotten a single reply since you

shipped out."

"Course she has. I haven't seen her since then. I see you every day. What d'you need a letter for when I can just talk to you?"

John blows a raspberry. "Write me a letter, Buck."

"We are currently walkin' down a road, Bucky."

"So?"

"I think you're drunk, Major."

"Delightfully tipsy, Major! Doesn't mean I don't want a letter."

Jack looks back at them. He's far enough away that Gale doesn't think he'll be able to overhear, but he slows his steps all the same. John matches him without complaint.

"What d'you want the letter to say?" Gale asks, because the truth is he's started and stopped a half-dozen letters since he got that one over breakfast. It's just that every time he puts pen to paper, he thinks of that lipstick print and forgets every word he's ever learned. What is he supposed to say to that? Marge has kissed her letters to Gale. Now John has, too, and Gale has no idea what to do about it.

"Obviously the secret ingredient of your grandma's chicken pot pie recipe," John says, and then snorts and nudges his knuckles against the line of Gale's jaw. "Whatever the fuck you want, Buck. Ain't that the point of a letter? It's not like anyone else is writing me one."

It's a strangely sobering thought. Every mail call that rolls in, John's name is rarely, if ever, bellowed by a private. He's gotten a letter or two from his sister and mother, but while other men bring their letters to their noses to inhale some sweetheart's perfume, John pours another finger of whiskey and laughs the lump out of his throat.

Gale clears his. "Dear John—"

John's laugh cuts him off. "Oh, fuck off, don't start it like that. You think I want a fucking Dear John letter? Christ, Buck."

Gale glares at him. John smiles right back. Gale sighs at the sky and starts again. "Dear Bucky, the stone in my shoe—"

"Be still my beating heart."

“You’ve asked for a letter,” Gale continues, determined to ignore him, “and it seems only fair I heed your request.”

“So you’re not even doing this because you w—”

“D’you want a letter or not?”

John snickers, hand briefly drifting to pat Gale’s cheek before resettling on his shoulder. “Fine, fine, shutting up, sir.”

“There’s nothing much to report,” Gale says after a brief pause, since this is the first time he’s ever been watched while writing a letter and he’s frankly not even sure what to say. “Fair winds, calm skies, pretty girls, loud men. Like always, you’re the loudest of them all.”

“Hey, now.”

“I hope you’re not letting more people throw darts at apples balanced on your head, but thanks for my bicycle all the same.”

“It was a one-time thing.”

“Those Brits were pricks,” Gale continues, the lights of the base appearing on the horizon. Jack looks back at them once more, but they’ve drifted far enough behind that he’d have to have the ears of a dog to actually hear what Gale’s saying. “Never minded what they call ‘heavy-petting,’ and you know the boys don’t, either. Think the Brits are just sore because we actually manage to hit our targets, even at night.”

“Hmm.”

Gale glances at John out of the corner of his eye. He’s looking straight ahead, brows furrowed and lips pursed, though it’s just dark enough that his expression is largely shadowed. But he’s not pulling away. Perhaps he needed to hear this—needed to know Gale doesn’t mind. John’s usually an observant man, so Gale might have thought he’d have picked up on that by now. But sometimes it’s more reassuring to hear it said. After all, Gale didn’t call John his best friend until John called Gale that first.

“You asked me to remind you to buy a book about Erik the Red next time you’re in London,” Gale says, which isn’t exactly true, but he’s unable to make himself mention the lipstick print. If John remembers it, he’ll have to say so himself. “So here I am remindin’ you. Maybe I’ll even go with you.”

“Paint the town red,” John murmurs.

“I’ll buy one about dodo birds, *my* favorite extinct animal.”

“Dodo birds?”

“And now I’m runnin’ out of room, so I’ll say goodnight and remind you to drink water before you pass out because hungover you ain’t the most fun you. Hugs and kisses, Gale.”

They walk in silence for several long moments, Croz’s giggle drifting back to them at whatever Curt just said that has Jack scruffing him like an unruly kitten. John sniffs, loud in the night, and glances at Gale with a quirk to his lips, his face painted in a shard of pale gold from the base’s lights. Gale doesn’t look back, save for a peek out of the corner of his eye. He feels strangely exposed, a copper wire revealed after its rubber is torn free. Like to touch him might shock you, and yet John doesn’t pull away.

It’s hard to tell what John is thinking. Perhaps he simply wants to look at Gale. Far be it from Gale to deprive him of the pleasure.

And when John does speak, all he says is “Why the dodo bird?”

“So I can show it what it’s like to fly.”

“You big softie, you.”

Gale snorts.

# # #

John’s hand slips into Gale’s pocket, and he probably thinks he’s being subtle about it, but John is about as subtle as a two-thousand-pound demolition bomb. Gale glances at him as they’re walking to the barracks after the bombing of Norwich ends and all sense of revelry has faded. Gale will return to the mess hall to collect his bike tomorrow, when his hip stops aching from its collision with the floor.

“Somethin’ in my pocket you want?” Gale asks, voice low, since the men are around them, trooper boots crunching over gravel and whispering through wet grass. No one’s paying them any attention, but it doesn’t hurt to be careful.

“Nah,” John says, and it’s too dark to really tell, but he might be blushing. He angles his face away like he is.

With a hum, Gale reaches into his pocket and has to turn his face away now, too, lest John see the smile that steals across his mouth at the flimsy piece of paper. It's no envelope, but it wasn't there when Gale last pocketed his hands, so he knows it's some letter. He's been wondering when John would give him a new one.

All the same, he waits until he's brushed his teeth and tucked up in his rack, book cracked open and flashlight aimed at its pages, before he unfolds the slip of paper John gave him. It looks like a receipt swiped off the bar and smells a bit smoky, but it's legible enough. He can't fathom when John wrote it, given he's been glued to Gale's side all night, but Gale supposes he has to blink on occasion.

Dear Buck,

Here's a list of extinct animals various people could name (I even asked Tatty, and Tatty asked me to ask you how often I was dropped on the head as a baby): dinosaurs (when Curt said this, Crank said, "Birds still exist"); the wooly mammoth; the auroch (I said, "Gesundheit," and Ev said he regretted answering my question); the saber-toothed tiger; the thylacine (Harding claims to have seen this in a zoo, and Red looked at me like Harding was full of shit); the Rocky Mountain locust; Stellar's sea cow (you'll find a drawing of one on the back of this, courtesy of Mike, who also gave me this receipt to write this all down while you were playing fetch with Meatball).

Do you think we'll go extinct one day? Bomber pilots, I mean, not humans. Do you think anyone will remember what we did up in the sky? Maybe we'll all just be dodo birds, too.

Bucky

P.S. I drew the dodo bird. Mike says it looks terrible. I've named him Gale.

Gale turns the receipt over, folding his bottom lip between his teeth when he spies the sea cow drawing, which actually looks like an animal that could have existed. The dodo bird, by comparison, is a lumpy circle with a beak. A speech bubble by what might be its head says "Neigh!"

Smirking, Gale peeks at John in the rack beside his and finds him turned toward Gale, head pillowed on his hands, but his eyes closed. The edge of the beam from Gale's flashlight shines on his face, letting Gale see the faintest curl to the corners of his lips. He's awake but pretending not to be. The barrack is quiet and dark, the men gone to sleep, so Gale leans over the side of his bed to fish out a fresh sheet of

paper from the sheaf he keeps to write letters to Marge.

Dear Bucky,

Thanks for the list. His name is John.

Neigh,

Buck

Gale turns the paper over and sketches a makeshift unicorn, little more than a vague horse shape with a triangle poking out of its forelock and a speech bubble by its mouth. Then he folds the paper into an airplane and sends it flying toward John, who doesn't react, even when it collides with his nose. It's not until Gale's turned the flashlight off and laid down in bed, settling in for the night, that he hears John slowly, quietly, unfold the paper and angle it to catch the moonlight peeking in through the crack between the curtains. John snorts, and then quietly says, "Quack," and Gale bites the inside of his cheek hard enough to taste blood.

# # #

It becomes something of a ritual after that, letters exchanged no matter how long or short it's been since Gale saw John or John saw Gale. The letters are held hostage when Gale goes on a mission without John, or John goes on one without Gale, an unspoken demand they return alive. Gale chews his nail beds raw while he waits for John to return, and Gale learns John takes to harassing the Tower for updates when he's not pestering people for more extinct animals. Gale's not really sure what to make of this new normal, receipts slipped into pockets, gum wrappers tucked into hands, empty cigarette packs placed on a pillow like a cat's dead mouse.

But he knows, even when he nearly loses an eye after a piece of cardstock falls out of his crusher cap while he's in the act of putting it on, it's not a bad thing. It's not a habit he'd ever want to stop, or give up. Writing to John about anything and everything—"Dear Bucky, Today I saw a cloud that looked like you, complete with blue eyes. Hugs and kisses, Buck"; "Dear Buck, Did you mean to sneeze like that while answering that replacement's question during your practice flight? It damn near made the entire Tower piss themselves laughing. Gesundheit, Bucky"; "Dear Bucky, Next time I'm poking you while you're snoring to get you to turn over, do not say, 'Keep your knickers on, Mrs. Egan,' in response. Somehow Curt found out and now he won't stop calling me Mrs. Egan. Never yours, Buck"; "Dear Buck, I'm

bored during this lecture so here's a drawing of what you looked like when you took a nap under a tree and woke up with a cow asleep on you. Should I be jealous, Mrs. Egan? XOXO, Bucky"—makes busy work for idle hands, gives him something to think about when he's flying through flak other than a constant mantra of *don't die don't die don't die*. Gale couldn't explain it, but he keeps every letter, tucked safely into his footlocker with John's lucky deuce. Even the gum wrappers with "Hi Buck!" and inside-out cigarette packs decorated with more nonsensical doodles than actual words.

But Gale doesn't get another lipstick print of a kiss until he touches down in Algeria. His bones still buzz from the rattle of the fort around him, held together by spit and a prayer; his skin still feels numb from the rattling crossing over the Mediterranean Sea. His jaw aches from how tightly he'd gritted his teeth for a good portion of the flight. Even when the runway appeared and Friedkin finally stopped looking so panicked, Gale found it hard to ease off his molars. He's barely spoken more than a few words in the day since they touched down, instead lying on his back in the sun. It would be cooler in the shade, but he can't bring himself to move. After hours trapped above ten thousand feet, not sure if they'd erupt into a ball of flame or find themselves alone in the sky as their fort falls apart around them, he's not the only one eager to bask in the sunlight.

So when it's suddenly blocked, Gale pries one eye open to glare up at the unwanted umbrella. John looks down at him, red fez on his head, aviators perched on his nose to reflect Gale back at him. There's a smudge of red on the corner of John's mouth, like a bloodstain. In his sweaty, dirty tank top, John's all broad shoulders and tanned skin, and Gale wonders what he might feel like. Hot to the touch, certainly, warmed by the very sun whose light he's stolen from Gale. John cocks his head at Gale, like he's a particularly shiny stone he's considering picking up. Gale reaches out and tugs one of the laces on John's boot, freeing it from its knot.

John snorts and drops something onto Gale's chest, and while Gale's distracted, slips away to tie his boot. Gale holds the envelope up, his heart kicking in his chest. When he gets up, sand falls away from him in clouds, but he ignores the grumbles of the men he leaves behind as he ducks into the shade cast by the nearest fort. Its metal is scorching, but Gale leans back against it all the same and looks at the envelope. It's blood-stained on one corner. John hadn't looked too hurt when they landed, nothing more than flecks of blood on the bridge of his nose, his cheek. Maybe it isn't his. Gale isn't sure if that's a comfort. Any blood spilled is bad. Croz told him when he thinks they lost

Biddick, but no one saw what happened to his fort.

Or, at least, no one's been brave enough to tell Gale or John.

Folding his bottom lip between his teeth, Gale frees the letter from its envelope. It's wrinkly, like it was tucked into a pocket, and stained with the same blood as the envelope, but it's the lipstick print by Bucky's name that draws Gale's eye. His breath hitches, and he dusts the dusty pad of his thumb over its shape, the bow of his upper lip, the curve of his bottom.

Perhaps Gale is sun-drunk, too hot and tired, but he brings the mark to his own mouth, brushes his lips right over it. It's still sticky.

Dear Buck,

I'm writing this while pretending to read Guys and Dolls, sitting on a tarmac surrounded by fog. This time tomorrow, hopefully we'll be in the Algerian sunshine, too hot and sweaty and wishing for fog again. Right now, I wouldn't mind it fucking off. The wait is almost worse.

You asked if I had something to do with Harding putting me on Crank's fort, and yeah, I did. Maybe not for the reason you think—or at least, that's not the only reason. I'd go crazy sitting here at the base, waiting for everyone to return. You know that as well as I do, because you'd do the same. I'll be ahead of you in the lineup, probably won't be able to even see your fort, but I'll feel better knowing I'm up there in the sky with you knowing I can at least shoot back.

Crank won't stop saying my name, so adieu. I'll see you in Algeria.

Hugs and kisses,

Bucky

P.S. Hi from Algeria! I'm sitting in the shade right now, watching you burn to a crisp in the sunlight, and frankly I can't fathom what you're doing. Can't really fathom what the fellas are doing out there with you, either. You're blinding me with your pasty white skin, Buck, and all I've got is this fez. The kids said they'd try to find an umbrella for you, but jury's out on whether that's even possible. Maybe I can convince that goat with the enormous balls to shade you.

P.P.S. Can lipstick melt? I feel like it's just smeared all over my face, but I'm bored and tired and hot, so here, have a kiss.

P.P.P.S. Seriously, Buck, get out of the fucking sun. Don't make me be your umbrella.

Gale looks up, gaze flicking over everyone in sight until he finds the red fez on John's head. Then he looks at John's mouth, spies that smudge of red, and feels his stomach flip. He's not really sure why, and blames the sun for bringing that lip print back to his mouth. It's still sticky. John's lips would be sticky, too.

It doesn't feel like something wrong to think, not in the way it probably should, if certain closed-minded people are to be believed. It doesn't even feel wrong to think about it in the wake of that hellfire in the sky they flew through to get here, in pieces, engine dead. They could die any day, gone up in flames and smoke. How could it ever be wrong to take comfort from where—from who—he can?

But just because Gale doesn't mind thinking the thoughts doesn't mean he knows what to do with them now that he's thought them. So he simply folds the letter, tucks it into the envelope, and slips it into his pocket. Then he ventures back out into the sunlight, and fights a smile when John's gaze immediately finds him. And when Gale returns to his spot in the sand, John throws his hands into the air.

John joins him, like Gale knew he would. "Service charge," he says when he reaches Gale, leaning over and plucking the toothpick out of the corner of Gale's mouth. Gale watches him, mouth gone dry, when John tucks it between his own teeth with a grin. He doesn't look away until a cloud of sand appears on the horizon.

# # #

"I'll write you a letter from London," John said, "so it's waiting for you to get back." It's all Gale can think about the first several days he's in Stalag Luft III, that and the fact that John will get back to Thorpe Abbotts after his weekend pass is up and find Gale's gone. He won't know Gale's alive, that he and Benny bailed out in time, that he crashed into some poor farmer's kitchen and, at the point of a pitchfork, tried to reassure the farmer's wife and daughter he wasn't a bad guy. He won't know that the last thought Gale had before he flicked the bailout bell in *Our Baby* is "I wish I'd kissed him."

Frankly, Gale himself isn't sure what to make of that. He only knows it's true. It's not a panic-inducing thought, the way it might be for some men who realize they want to kiss their best friend, who is also a man. But it is something that makes him want to slap himself upside

the head. Of all the times to come to that realization, of course it's when it's too late.

But in the stalag, Gale does the only thing he can: he's there for the men, leading them as he always has, even if it does feel like he's missing one half of himself. It doesn't help that, every time someone from the Hundredth sees him coming, they look past him, as if searching for John. Gale feels his absence like a phantom limb.

It's worsened from an itch to an ache when Crank arrives, stumbling through the main gates looking dusty and tired. Gale stands at the barbed wire fence along the entryway and smiles when Crank's eyes land on him, but that smile fractures when the first thing Crank yells is "Bucky make it here yet?"

Heartbeat kicking, Gale falls into step with him, shouting to be heard over the clamor of airmen asking after airmen: "He flew with you?"

"With Brady!" Crank shouts back. "They bailed before my fort was hit!"

Gale leaves his heart behind in the frozen dirt of the yard. Brady hasn't made it here yet, either, and Gale isn't sure if he should be relieved or not. Maybe he and John are in the hands of some resistance members, being secreted back to England. And yet, even as Gale crosses his fingers inside his sleeves, he doubts it to be true. Crank shouts that they were targeting Münster, and Gale knows Bucky would have bailed out deep in enemy territory. He'd be more likely to encounter collaborators than allies.

Crank is put in the compound opposite Gale's, and while they can wave at each other from either side of the entryway lined with barbed wire, they know better than to shout anything mission critical. Granted, it's unlikely to be anything useful anymore, since their information would be days, if not weeks, out of date. But it doesn't hurt to be cautious.

Gale waits, nerves only apparent in the fidget of his fingers while he tries to keep the men in his hut occupied, distracted. They finagle together a radio and Gale takes it upon himself to listen, writing down shorthand to be translated into code to then be passed along to the other officers in charge of other hutments. Every time a new group of prisoners arrive, Gale waits by the fence, scanning each face, hoping to find blue eyes and black curls at the same time he hopes John somehow made it back to England.

He has such a strong image of John in his head, imperious and unbreakable, even in the face of disaster—of capture by the krauts—that Gale doesn't immediately recognize him. A tall man, black curls lank on his forehead, face stained with blood, bruised and swollen, limps into the stalag, all fight drained out of him.

Then that man shouts, "Crank!" and Gale would know that voice anywhere. He shoulders his way forward, crusher cap on his head and grin on his face, and says, "John Egan, your two o'clock!" He doesn't say seeing John is like finding the end of a rainbow. Like touching his north star. Like his compass has finally stopped spinning out of control.

# # #

It takes months before John is finally transferred into Gale's compound and his hut, and Gale isn't sure what made the krauts move him but he's not about to complain. He's watched John from afar, withering away, growing too-thin and hollow-eyed, like it's simply too exhausting to exist when trapped on solid ground. Gale isn't sure what he can do, but when he gets word of a transfer of prisoners between compounds and the scuttlebutt hints John will be one of them, the bunk at the foot of Gale's is cleared in anticipation. And by the roving light of a watchtower after lights-out, Gale fetches a scrap of paper to write.

Dear Bucky,

I said it once but it bears repeating: What the hell took you so long? I know you'll say I'm just being sentimental, but Crank showed up ages before you despite the fact you bailed out first, and he didn't look beat to hell. It's been months since we've been able to properly talk, and I've had to watch you fade I've had to settle for smiles and waves when what I really want and you need to eat more, Major. Can't have you getting so skinny the krauts can't see you anymore. You'll just slip through the floorboards without me.

The boys set this bunk up special for you, so give them a proper "thank you" when you get here. I'll be waiting to hear the daring dos of your capture.

Hugs and kisses,

Buck

Gale tucks the letter—looking naked without an envelope, but he

saves those for sending letters to Marge—under John's pillow. John won't be able to miss it when he goes to lay down. The pillows are thin enough to be paper themselves.

In truth, Gale isn't sure what he expects from John when he moves into the hut. He smiles at the men, listens to them ramble about everything they've been up to, whistles in awe at the radio, and claps Gale on the shoulder before climbing into bed. His head hits the pillow, the crinkle of the letter audible even from where Gale sits at the table in the center of the room. But if John hears it, he doesn't make it known. He simply rolls onto his side, facing the wall, and breathes in, back expanding. With an exhale, he goes still.

Crank, newly arrived in this compound too, simply shrugs when Gale glances at him. It's clear he wants to say something, that pinch to his lips looking a bit tighter than usual, but he won't say it while John is awake to hear it. (Later Crank says John slept for days when he first arrived. The medic diagnosed him with a concussion and a few cracked ribs, but beyond making sure John could still wake up and didn't forget simple facts, there was nothing to be done. It took John days to stagger out of his bed—it took too much coaxing and cajoling and a mutter of Gale's name for John to even get up when surprise inspections were announced—and days to start eating again. The only time he seemed to return to himself, to remember he had a body he inhabited, was when he could meet Gale at the barbed wire fence, waving across the gap between compounds.) Murphy doesn't appear to notice, too busy tucking into a tin of beans.

For days, Gale waits for John to make noise about the letter, which still loudly crinkles from its spot beneath John's pillow. But John remains listless, even as he starts to shadow Gale everywhere he goes, keeping Gale in his sightline as Gale keeps the men occupied with any and all activities he can dream up. John has never held any interest in physics, but he attends the lessons Gale gives all the same, lingering like a shadow in the back of the classroom. But every time Gale peeks, the letter is still there under John's pillow, seemingly untouched, wrinkled and torn at the corners from the weight of John's head.

It's not until John finds him while he's collecting water that he finally broaches the topic: "Any word on the mail?" Gale asks, handing John one of the pitchers, the acrid stench of John's cigarette not nearly as pleasant as the Lucky Strikes he prefers. The krauts confiscate those when the Red Cross sends them.

"Nope," John says.

“Another holdup?”

“War?”

Gale glances at him sideways, at the beanie pulled low over his ears. At least he’s invested in keeping away frostbite. “Your pillow’s awful crinkly, Major,” Gale says, and when John frowns at him in question, Gale just raises his brows and looks away.

Benny throws up the cat. A surprise inspection sends them scrambling out of the hut. Gale wraps his scarf around his head, shoulder to shoulder with John, and picks at his bottom lip, dry skin flaking away. He has no idea if John caught the hint Gale dropped, but he’d rather the krauts not get their hands on his letter. They’re bound to find it under John’s pillow.

A hand smacks his away from his mouth, and when he glares at John, John just shrugs and plunges his fingers into Gale’s pocket, there and gone.

Gale doesn’t dare hope, even as he reaches into his pocket and feels the edges of a piece of paper. The kraut shouting out their numbers is loud, though not nearly as loud as the kraut shouting about having found the radio. Even being cut off from the outside world isn’t enough to piss Gale off any more than being a POW in the stalag already does. Not when he has his hand wrapped around John’s letter.

When he peeks out of the corner of his eye, John is smiling into the scarf tugged up around his chin, and for the first time since he staggered through the front gates, it looks real. Gale nudges their shoulders together. John nudges him right back.

# # #

It’s still not until the next night that Gale gets a chance to read the letter, and even then, he has to wait for each pass of the watchtower’s light to snatch it in bits and pieces.

Dear Buck,

I’ll tell you one day, but not yet. It’s still a flak hole, and I’ve got no ground crew here to patch it. I still feel his blood on me. I can’t fucking wash it off.

I heard you tell Crank and Brady about landing in that kitchen, though. Since I know that much about you, I’ll say this much about me: I landed in a field. I hid my chute in a wagon full of hay. (You’re right, it does smell

good.) I ate a cabbage and went for a swim.

I'll also say this: I'm glad you're alive. I worried you wouldn't be. I didn't really like who I became at the idea you were gone.

I sent you a postcard from London. It's in your footlocker. When it arrived at the base, I told the boys I got the girl I met to kiss it, and in a way, she did. When she left in the morning, her lipstick was still on my mouth. She was as pretty as you, blond and bold. You'd have liked her.

Do you think we count as extinct animals yet?

Bucky

The hut feels too quiet, even with some of the men snoring like they're paid to. Gale angles the letter so each strobe of the wandering watchtower light catches on that paragraph about the postcard. He never expected John to allude to the fact he kisses Gale's letters—and certainly never expected him to acknowledge donning lipstick to do so.

But something about the idea—the image of John kissing Gale's postcard with the lipstick left by a girl's kiss—makes heat settle in Gale's chest and spread its fingers through his abdomen. Like he plucked a burning coal out of the cookstove in the corner and swallowed it whole, and now it's breaking apart and wedging pieces into his flesh. He has to squint to see the lines John crossed out, isn't quite sure he's read them correctly, but it's enough to have him fumbling for a scrap of paper off the pile on the shelf on his wall.

With each flash of the watchtower light, he pens his reply.

Dear Bucky,

Thank you for telling me that much. I'll wait until you're ready to share the rest, but just because Lemmons isn't here doesn't mean you don't have a ground crew. I know my way around a plane. And if not me, so does Brady, or Murphy, or Crank.

I'm glad you're alive, too. I'm glad you had a good time in London and that you met a girl who helped you forget (at least, so I assume—so I hope). I'll look for the postcard when we get back home. Maybe you can tell me what it said until then.

Thank you for the kiss, real or not.

Hugs and kisses,

Buck

P.S. No, we're not extinct yet, Major. How can we be when we're still here together? I can still see you. That means you're still real, and if you're real, so am I.

Gale folds the letter without rereading it, then listens to make sure everyone is asleep. John doesn't snore, but he hasn't since he arrived in the hut. Gale only knows he sleeps by the slow and steady rise and fall of his chest, so Gale tucks the letter under the corner of John's pillow and trusts he'll find it when he wakes up.

# # #

No matter how many letters Gale writes, John continues to slip further and further away, retreating into himself like an animal trying to distance itself from the pack before it dies. The only time he speaks more than a few words at a time—in increasingly melancholic prose—is when he writes letters to Gale.

Gale tries to get creative with how he sends letters to John: writing "Hi Bucky" in soap scum in the shower room; spelling "Major John Egan" out with pretty rocks and funny curved sticks when they sit side by side on the steps of their hut; on the cold nights, when they have to share a bunk and it's John's turn to be the little spoon, Gale writes "Night, John" across John's back with his fingertip (John always returns the favor when it's Gale's turn, a small "Night, Buck" written too loopy for Gale to pick up every letter). It's John who writes more, tracing contrails across Gale's back that are mostly illegible. Perhaps he doesn't even mean for Gale to read them. Sometimes he'll pick up a stray word here and there—*smile*, *cloud*, *heartbeat*, *warning wire*, *kraut*, *fuck*, *fuck*, *fuck*—but he doesn't ask after the rest, or for John to repeat himself. If this keeps John sane, if this keeps John with him, he'll happily be John's chalkboard again and again.

Some days John gets better. It's hard for Gale to keep the men's spirits up while clinging to John's sanity by his fingernails, so when John is there to help shoulder the load, Gale feels like he can finally breathe again. But it never lasts long, especially not when the only letters John gets are from Gale.

Gale still gets letters from Marge, smelling sweet with her perfume, a window to a life outside the stalag. John gets especially morose on those days. Gale has yet to find a way to pull him out of it save for

giving him time and proximity. It's not because John dislikes that Gale has someone to write to. John loves Marge, always has. But the notion of not setting life up right—of not having someone who knew John from before the war, from before the stalag—haunts him like the ghost of every man they lost in the sky.

At least the invasion enlivens the camp, gives all of them a purpose to prepare for every eventuality. The krauts up the surprise inspections, increase the number of dogs, let them loose from the leash far more often than before. Guns shoot warning shots into the sky at all hours of the day and night. Fewer Red Cross packages arrive, though Gale can't be sure if that's a device of the krauts to crush morale or simply a byproduct of the fact the Allies are now in Europe.

The march is inevitable, and when they stop for the night, huddled together for warmth, backs and chests and legs and arms become their paper. John holds his coat open and Gale climbs right into it. Most of the other men are doing the same with their friends, too, so no one looks sideways at the Buckies, even when John cracks a smile at making Gale laugh with tic-tac-toe on the broad stretch of John's thigh. Even when Gale makes John drop his face into the crook of Gale's neck at XOXO traced across John's palm with a fingertip.

Lines blur, and Gale lets them, grows to fit them, the blurred edges of their shared reality. It hardly matters normal changes by the day. When John is with Gale, when Gale is with John, the synchronicity feels the same.

# # #

Gale is crouched by a roadside, watching a white horse splattered in blood, when he finally realizes something's poking his ankle, and has been every step away from that low stone wall, John's shout ringing in his ears. The horse gallops away, taking his breath with it, and he and George and Geroge don't stop running until that German town is so far behind them that Gale doubts he could find his way back, however much he'd like to. He knows he'll never forgive himself for leaving John behind.

He slumps against a tree trunk, catching his breath, and finally reaches into his boot to free whatever's caught there. When his fingertip touches paper, his heart stops beating.

George goes for a piss. The other George slides down the tree trunk to the ground, no matter the dirt. With shaking hands, Gale unfolds the

letter. It's tiny, a page from what might be a notebook left behind in the warehouse they slumped in last night. John's handwriting is almost impossible to make out, charcoal-smeared as it is, but Gale is determined to fetch every word from the coaldust they hide in.

Dear Gale,

I'm writing this with your shoulder as my table. This paper is so dirty I have no idea if you'll even be able to read what I write. You fell asleep on me before I could beat you at tic-tac-toe.

Here's a secret: Sometimes life feels like a series of moments that only happen when you blink, in the seconds you're not able to see them. Most days in that stalag, I felt like that's where I lived. I couldn't feel anything. But sometimes I'd see you, and I'd remember what it's like to live where eyes are open.

Thank you for that first letter under my pillow.

John

P.S. I'm sticking this in your boot. Sorry for any resultant papercuts. I can't reach your pockets.

P.P.S. You told me once that I was the Hundredth's unicorn. What I never told you is that you've always been mine.

George dies at the hands of some fucking kids with empty rifles, and Gale knows he's left half of himself behind in the dark. It asked to be let go, but blood still weeps from the cut.

# # #

Croz and Rosie linger behind Gale while he opens his footlocker, so he can only pocket the postcard and the lucky deuce and an empty cigarette pack that wasn't here last time.

It's not until he's in the shower, steam billowing around him, alone for the first time in eighteen months, that he withdraws the postcard. He brings it to his mouth, brushes his lips over that long-awaited lipstick kiss, and tries to imagine what John's mouth might taste like. Gale's never kissed a man before—he never even knew he wanted to before John named Gale after himself and ignored every single one of Gale's protests—but it doesn't bother him, the realization he'd like to kiss John. Even if that were something to panic about, it's never been in his nature to panic needlessly. (He's far more prone to turtling into

himself, tucking his arms and legs and head into his shell. It's usually John who has to knock his knuckles on it to coax him back into tasting fresh air and daylight. Gale clung to his sanity in the stalag because he had no other option, but he knows John always saw the days it was too much. Usually, those were the days John let loose, got loud, because he knew it'd shock Gale into taking a breath.)

But right now, with the steam making a smear of his reflection on the mirror—he hasn't seen his own face in eighteen months; he existed only in the eyes of others, a person because they decreed him one every time they met his gaze—there's nothing to pull him out but loops of blue ink over cardstock.

Dear Buck,

Hi from London! Paulina says hi, too! (That's her shade of pink. I think it's pretty, but red suits me better.)

Went dancing. Went drinking. Broke my heart alone because you weren't here to do it with me. You still owe me a sojourn into society. When you win the game, I'm not taking no for an answer.

I'm running out of room and the sun's too bright. Why'd I let you talk me into drinking so much?

Drive fast and take chances!

Bucky

Gale wipes sweat and steam from his forehead and glances at the door when voices shout their way past. When they fade, he kisses the lip print one more time and tucks the postcard into his folded shirt to keep it from getting too damp. Then he unfolds the cigarette pack by the carefully ripped and re-taped seam. Something about tucking the words out of sight like this, folding them within the Lucky Strikes brand emblazoned across the pack, makes John delicate.

Dear Gale is scrawled across the top in uncharacteristic black ink, without any curlicues or flourishes, and each word is far tinier than Gale knew John was even capable of. But more than anything else, it's the use of Gale's first name that makes his palms sweat, in a way he can't blame the steam for.

Dear Gale,

You're not dead. I refuse to believe that. If you were dead, I'd feel it, that

organ in my chest gone still and cold. Even so, I can't even be sure you'll ever get to read this letter, and so I'm writing it with things I wish I would've said, would've done, before you got into a fort and I boarded a train, boastful in the belief we'd both make it back.

I wish I'd given you the lucky deuce again before you left. I've left it here for you now. You need it more than I do. (Do you know I still have that toothpick I stole from you, back in Algeria? I couldn't throw it out. It's lived in my pocket since. It's in my pocket now.)

I'm running out of time and I don't know how to put this all into words. You are literally the only person who has ever managed to make me tongue-tied. You're certainly the only reason my heart ever skips a beat. Thought I was having a heart attack the first time it happened. There's just this way your eyes shine blue as the sky when it's early and the coffee hasn't yet kicked in and you're quietly grumping (always where the men can't hear you) about eating powdered eggs older than Benny's balls (I still don't get the meaning behind that, but I'll take your word for it). The sun will hit your eyes just right, and you'll tilt your face up into the light, and it's enough to

The latter half of that sentence is crossed out beyond salvation. When Gale runs his finger over the heavy lines, he can feel the grooves left behind by the ballpoint of John's pen.

I wish I'd kissed you before you left. It's all I could think about doing when you pirouetted away with Meatball, but I wasn't brave enough to take his place. I convinced myself I'd have time to do it one day before the war ends, maybe, even though I know it'll never happen.

I said I'd tell Marge about your dance with Meatball. I still might. (Don't worry, I haven't written her that you didn't make it back. You're still alive, after all. Telling her you're M.I.A. would only worry her, and you'd hate me if I did that. I'd hate me if I did that.) I don't have time for lipstick. This confession will have to do.

I'll see you again, be it on this side or that.

Your extinct animal,

John

Gale folds the cigarette pack back up and hides it away with the postcard. He showers, peeling off months' worth of grime and sweat. He scrapes horizons of blood and dirt out from under his fingernails. He dries off, and he gets dressed, and he eats what is put before him,

and he gets back into a plane and drops crates of food instead of bombs, their parachutes like jellyfish in the sky over a sea of flowers.

He doesn't think about it, save for when he does.

# # #

They don't talk about it. Gale returns to Thorpe Abbotts with John's voice clearing him for landing. He shakes John's hand because when he goes in for a hug John cringes back—flinches, really, like Gale might have slapped him—and he must see something on Gale's face, since he rambles some excuse about having not yet showered. Gale can smell him, so it's true enough, but he doesn't care. And they don't talk about it.

The cigarette pack grows heavier and heavier in his pocket with each day that passes. No letters find their way into his hands, no matter how many gum wrappers saying "Hi Bucky!" he tucks into John's. (Certainly no lips find Gale's.) In fact, John is more subdued than ever, and while his mutters of shellshock are true enough (Gale knows John has nightmares during the night because, most nights, Gale is already awake thanks to his own), he's visibly holding himself back. He mentions Marge more than usual. He pointedly doesn't touch Gale, and when Gale reaches to touch him, he doesn't let it land.

The closest Gale gets to freeing the words from the soft tissue of his lungs is when John hands him the flask while they watch firecrackers and sparklers paint the world in shattered color, while the base celebrates the war's end. He opens his mouth to say something, takes a breath to speak, but John makes his excuses and vanishes, and no one Gale asks saw him go.

Perhaps John regrets saying he'd like to kiss Gale. Perhaps it was only a spur of the moment thing, words wrung out of him by grief like water from a rag. Perhaps John was just in his cups. Perhaps he never even meant to leave the pack for Gale to find at all.

If nothing else, Gale has the letters. They'll never be as good as the real thing, but in the dark of night, when he's alone in his rack, he can press them to his lips and pretend.

# # #

It's after the fifth consecutive night spent in the bathtub in the little house he and Marge call their own (they're not married yet—there's still time), Marge knelt beside him with thinly-veiled panic etched

across her lovely face, that Gale writes a list. He titles it “Things I can’t get used to.”

1. *The routine. (Or lack thereof. I don’t miss the uncertainty, the horror, but at least in the stalag I knew what was expected of me every time I got out of bed.)*
2. *The bed. (The stalag bunk was hard as wood and the rack at Thorpe Abbotts was too thin, but this bed I have now might swallow me like the Channel does a bomb.)*
3. *The mirror. (I got used to shaving by touch in the stalag. I got used to only knowing I exist by the calls of “Hey Major!” and meeting the eyes of my men. I’m not sure I recognize these pearly whites. The scars are certainly new.)*
4. *The noise. (The neighborhood isn’t quiet—cars at all hours, dogs barking and kids shouting—but every time a crop duster flies overhead, I expect bombs to drop. I expect shouts to take cover.)*
5. *The safety. (I keep a knife under my pillow and a gun in my bedside drawer. I get up several times a night to check the locks. I know Marge hates this about me, though she’ll never say it. When she goes to work at the diner, I spend my day at the window, watching her go and waiting for her to return. Someone has to watch her back. Someone has to make sure she gets home safe.)*

He folds it up, sticks it in an envelope, and places it in the hand of the mailman (who thanks Gale for his service, and Gale can only flinch and stammer out a “You’re welcome, sir” and lock the front door behind him). It’s when Marge gets back from work and asks how the list-writing went that he realizes he was supposed to share it with her, not John. He recites it from memory, answers the questions she asks, and feels like he disappointed her while he pulls the roast out of the oven.

He likes cooking, even if he’s only good at a few recipes. Someone had to feed him when he was a kid, had to make sure his dad didn’t waste away. A cookbook was the first thing Gale ever checked out from the library on his own, his library card still warm from the hand of the librarian who wrote it up for him.

Right now, food feels like the only thing he can provide for Marge. The bags under her eyes grow darker with every night Gale finds himself hiding in the bathtub, her hand rubbing soothing circles onto his back.

He’s at the front window, waiting for Marge to return while potatoes boil on the stove, when the mailman tucks the mail into the box and

waves at Gale as he continues down the road. Gale waits until he's out of sight before he ventures out, and doesn't flick through the envelopes until he's safe inside the house once more. It's blue ink on a white envelope that has his heart dropping out of his chest. He leaves it there on the hardwood of the dining room floor to check on the potatoes, turn up the burner, peer out the window to see if Marge is on her way home though her shift doesn't end for another hour.

Then he returns to the dining room and stoops to fetch the envelope from where it fluttered under the table. His hands shake as he slips his thumb under the flap, breaks the seal, pulls the letter free. It's been months since he spoke to John, months since they said goodbye on that railroad platform with another handshake, Gale going home to Marge and John going back to Manitowoc. They promised they'd write. They haven't.

Dear Buck,

Thank you for your list. I'm not really sure what prompted you to send it to me (did you mean to send something else with it?), but yes, I've found it hard to get used to those things, too. Who would've thought I'd miss some rancid-ass beans after the war ends? I even miss the cat.

I don't have crop dusters here, but I might where I'm going. Remember when Ev said he had a cabin on the Utah-Idaho border, by that lake? He and his brother used to go out there to fish and hunt bears. Anyway, he said I could visit there if I ever wanted to, and I'm taking him up on it for the autumn and winter. I've written the address on the back of this paper, should you need to send me any more lists.

Your letter caught me just in time. I'm leaving in the morning, so I'll send this on my way out of town.

(I keep a knife under my pillow and a gun in my bedside drawer, too. I feel sorry for Marge.)

Bucky

P.S. Speaking of Marge, tell her I say hi!

Save for that postscript, the words are strangely stilted, almost overcorrect, like John held himself in check while he wrote. The first letter of each new paragraph wobbles, as if John pressed the pen there while he thought about what to say. Exhaling slowly, Gale turns the paper over and finds the address, brushes his fingertip over John's looping script. Drawn beside it is a lumpy circle with a pointy beak. A

speech bubble says “Neigh!”

Gale kisses the dodo bird. The potatoes boil over.

# # #

The problem isn’t that Gale finds some kind of routine, since he knows it’s what he needed. The problem is that his routine and Marge’s don’t synchronize. She had a life before he got home, a life during the war, and trying to fold Gale into the envelope of it is proving to them both he might be the wrong shape.

She tries to include him—he meets her friends, visits her family, stops by the diner on the days he can stomach the pats on the back from people who recognize him as Marge’s pilot. He tries to include her, but apart from her postscripts to John at the end of each letter (usually some knock-knock joke she thinks John would like, or some random factoid she heard from one of her diner regulars) there isn’t much space for her. He starts to study physics again, thinks of returning to school, tries to unearth the shrapnel from his lungs left behind by every teeth-rattling flight across the Channel, but the shatter of flak is hard to describe unless you’ve lived it.

They stop talking about the wedding. When someone asks, the answers are wishy-washy, an “Oh we can’t wait!” and “We’re just savin’ up!” Her folks start to write letters to Gale, reminding him they’re unmarried, even if they’re sharing a house. Gale keeps those letters, but he can’t unearth the words to reply.

He even tries writing letters to Marge, but they morph into words meant for John on the way out of the pen. He balls them up, tosses them into the trash, and goes for walks to the library. Sometimes he thinks about getting a dog.

John’s letters are infrequent, but they ease off their stilts with every one that comes. Gale researches Bear Lake, tells him about the Shoshone who were first recorded to have found it. He tells him about the explorer from the fur company, the mountain men who traded goods there, the Oregon Trail, the Mormons. He writes about visiting. It’s only five hours from Casper. (It takes longer for John to reply to those letters, and he never invites Gale over.)

Gale studies, and he writes, and he wishes things were different. It’s strange to think that, in the sky, in the stalag, all he could think was about life returning to how it used to be. He dreamed of going home, longed to wake up with nothing to do.

Now he's home. Now he wakes up with nothing to do. And still he thinks about life returning to how it used to be.

The only problem is, now, he doesn't know what that "used to be" even is.

# # #

John stops writing. Weeks pass, then a month, then two, and spring warms the world. Gale feels like he's tilted off his axis with each day that passes without a letter scrawled in blue ink. It was his routine, watching for the mailman and suffering a few minutes of mindless chatter (or, on the days he didn't have the stomach for it, watching from behind the curtains inside the house until the mailman walked out of sight), then fetching the letter, freeing it from the envelope, memorizing the words from the sheer number of times he'd read them. He'd sit down to study while Marge was gone, then get up around three to start cooking dinner. On the days without letters, he rereads the old, kept in an old shoebox in his closet. The very first is so faded with age and wear he puts on his rubber gloves (the kind he uses to clean the oven) to keep the oil on his skin from smearing it.

But when new letters cease to arrive, his axis tilts and with it goes his newfound normal. He stops studying, starts watching out windows again, finds himself in the bathtub, flinching at every crack of some old car rumbling past on the road outside. He waits for the whistle of bombs. He waits for the flak. He avoids the mirror even as he traces his scars.

It's late spring when Marge visits her folks for the weekend, and when she comes back, she gives Gale her engagement ring and he hates himself for feeling relieved. Relieved that he can stop failing her. Relieved that she can move on. Relieved that her life can get back to a normal he's tried to make his own. He knows, objectively, it's not healthy for either of them, this clinging they've done to promises made before spending years apart. Before they became someone new —recognizable, perhaps, for the familiarity of the mold, but they're an unknown. A blank space on a map. A toothless fort, twelve machine guns stripped from every side. It'll get you where it's going, but it's lost its purpose along the way.

They part as friends—they've always been friends, and that will never change, even if they did fall out of step—and with a promise to call each other in six months. They need to find a life outside one another. She needs to realize what it is to be a person not waiting for a man to

come home (even when he's there in body). He needs to realize he can't fold himself back into the life he had before the war. The armor required to live it no longer fits.

# # #

The rain stops right as Gale pulls into the driveway of the cabin in Garden City. He's not sure what he expected during the six hours it took him to drive here (certainly the most cogent six hours he's had since John stopped writing) but it's not something this rustic and… cute. Removed from the cabins around it, it sits nestled in a grove of aspens, just as the man who gave him directions when he stopped for gas said it would. It's a ways back from the lake, but still close enough that Gale can hear water lapping at the beach. John described it a little—one story apart from the attic (accessible through a trapdoor in the foyer closet), a wraparound porch, a sofa on a chain, the sky huge and blue, the lake huge and turquoise, the mountains huge and brownish-grey—but it's still less and, somehow, more than Gale imagined.

Gale parks his car behind what he assumes to be John's pickup. It has Wisconsin plates, even if it doesn't look like it's moved in days. Leaves have piled up around its tires. The back right one looks a bit flat. Slinging his duffel bag over his shoulder (he'll grab the boxes from the backseat and trunk when he knows he's welcome), he pockets his keys and climbs the steps to the front door. When he knocks, no one answers. When he tries the handle, it turns, unlocked.

"Shit," he says, paper rustling as he slowly swings the door in. Envelopes lay scattered all over the floor, as if the mailman poked them through the letterbox and didn't care if they'd ever get answered. Then again, why would he? He doesn't know John.

Gale shuts the door behind him and gathers the mail. Most are letters from him. None are open. When he finds the most recent, he slips his thumb under the flap.

Dear Bucky,

I have no idea if you'll get this. It's been over two months since you last sent a letter (I haven't been counting, but I did the math in case you're curious, and it's now been seventy-two days). Ev said you're still sending him money for utilities, so you're hopefully still at his cabin, but I'm coming to see you just in case. I'll be there the first of June. I'm not sure how long you'll let me stay, but I hope it's as long as you need.

I'll explain more when I get there, but Marge and I aren't getting married. We're different people now than those puppies before the war. She deserves someone who can be there for her in a way I no longer can. She also thinks you and I need each other more than we need anything else. These days, I think she might be right.

We've got things we need to talk about, so hopefully you're not a Mormon now. It might put a dampener on our relationship.

I'll see you in a day or two.

Hugs and kisses,

Buck

P.S. Marge left one of her lipstick tubes behind. It's not red, but I think peachy pink suits me fine. Here, have a kiss, on the house.

"Bucky?" he says, stacking the mail on the side table, lipstick print open to the still air of the cabin. The side table is simple pale wood, as is the sofa in the sitting room, its cushions the pattern of a horse blanket. The pale wood shelves are crowded with books and aren't layered in dust, as if John's been keeping up on the chores. The dining table is small but sturdy, adjacent to the start of a blunt hall that ends at a door hiding a bedroom, barely wide enough for a queen-size bed and a chair by an open window. Birdsong drifts inside. John's trooper boots sit by the wall. Shirts hang in the closet. Pants sit in dresser drawers. Packs of cigarettes and shiny lighters scatter the bedside table, as does a surprisingly clean ashtray in the shape of a duck. The bathroom is small and boasts a tub and shower spigot. The walls are all stacked logs. The paintings are landscapes, and the photographs lining the hall show Ev and his brother growing up side by side: on the back porch, on a pier, riding bicycles down a road framed by aspens.

Gale and John will be living in one another's pockets here, but it's not a thought that inspires regret or dread. It just makes him glad. He knows where he fits when he and John have barely more than ten by twelve feet in a hut in a stalag in a war. These close quarters, no matter how cramped, will be like coming home.

He leaves his duffel bag on the floor by the dresser, but fishes around inside for the chicken figurine whose face looks like John's. (It doesn't, but it made John laugh when Gale held it up and declared them twins.) Unwrapping the shirt he used to keep it safe on the drive, he tucks the chicken under his arm and slips into the kitchen.

Dishes and cutlery dry on the rack by the empty sink. The food in the fridge isn't, to his surprise, expired.

The idea in his head of what he'd find when he got here doesn't fit the reality. Aside from the piles of Gale's letters, John has actually kept the house clean and tidy. For all that he hated being Air Exec, he's always been good at creasing bed corners. It seems that hasn't changed.

Sticks crack and crunch under a heavy tread of footsteps. (Somehow, Gale remembers the pattern of John's steps, even nearly a year after they parted ways on that railroad platform.) Gale slips out onto the covered back porch and stops beside the wooden sofa on chains. Its cushions also boast the pattern of a horse blanket. Shaded by aspens, green leaves bright against white bark, whispering with each breeze, John strides barefoot up a path through the trees, wearing nothing but a pair of tiny swim shorts, scrubbing black curls dry with a towel. Beads of water race gravity across suntanned skin (gravity is winning, pulling them south). John has gained back the weight he lost in the stalag, his scars faded to silver stripes on his nose, his bicep, his waist. Black curls make commas across his chest, pasted to his pecs.

Dear John is all Gale can think while John has yet to notice him. *I'd like to lick that water off your shoulders. I think that means I'm queer. Who'd have thought? Hugs and kisses, Gale*

Gale tries to speak and finds his tongue too dry, so he clears his throat instead and sticks a toothpick in the corner of his mouth. John looks up, steps faltering.

"Gale?" he says, like he fears his photoreceptors might be lying to him.

At a loss—struck dumb by the Hollywood film star that is Major John C. Egan in the flesh—Gale simply holds aloft the chicken figurine. "It's no unicorn, but it'll have to do. I've named it Steve."

# # #

"I can't have changed that much," Gale says when John has yet to stop staring. He stared all through the tour of the cabin, and Gale pretended he hadn't already seen it. (John's eyes glance off the side table and its mountain of mail like a stone skipping over still water.) He stared while they waited for the teakettle to scream its upset. He stared while tea steeped in ceramic mugs with time-stolen fingerprints, and while Gale nibbled at a buttery cookie delivered two

days ago by the neighbors down the road. (A man who lives with another man. John blushes as he shares this.) He stares now, acting the vulture pressed into a corner of the kitchen while Gale sits on a stool at the kitchen bar. Between them sits the stove with the still-whining kettle, slowly losing its heat. It's surprisingly modern, but perhaps the Blakeleys recently renovated.

"Nah," John says at last, whites of his eyes bright. "I just didn't expect to see you."

"You'd have known I was coming if you read your mail." Gale flicks the most recent letter across the counter. It flutters to the floor. John's eyes skip right off it, refusing to sink.

"Marge know you're here?"

"She does." Gale sips his tea. Nibbles his second cookie. "She says 'hi,' of course."

"Hi," John says. "When's the wedding?"

"Never."

"What?"

"She and I broke up. Done and dusted. Man and wife no more, not that we ever became that. But, y'know, point remains."

John blinks. Then he frowns. And then he sips his tea and says, "Why?"

Gale drowns his cookie in his mug. "It just wasn't right for either of us. We tried to fit, but it just…It started to feel like flying a B-29 after only training in a B-17. We might be able to figure it out if we tried, but we just—We stopped. Trying, I mean. We fell outta step during the war, and when the war was over, we never fell back into it. Into step." Gale eats his soggy cookie to give himself a moment to check the rambling. "We weren't right for each other anymore, though it took us time to realize it. Simple as that."

John blinks again, once, twice. "And so you came…here?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"'Cause here's where you are, Major."

More blinking, but this time it's accompanied by the click of a lighter, the red flare of the cigarette catching flame, the inhale and the exhale. Smoke curls. Gale drops his chin onto his palm, watching the smoke fade. John stares at Gale in its wake.

"How long're you staying?"

"Tired of me already?" Gale asks, smiling.

John flushes. The cigarette trembles between his lips. Words emerge on the next exhale of smoke. "No, just…wonderin'."

"Then as long as you'll have me, Bucky," he says.

John nods, ashing the cigarette right into the sink. He washes the ash down with water, unthinkingly, like he's done it often enough it's habitual now. "There ain't much to do here, but Ev's got a decent collection of books. The neighbors—the ones who baked the cookies—host bridge once a week. I swim. Cook the recipes you mailed me. Get fat. Tried to build a card tower and got bored. It's quiet, for the most part. No crop-dusters. No noisy cars. You'd like it."

Gale hums. John put on a shirt and pants before giving Gale his tour, but the fabric clings to his skin everywhere the water had yet to evaporate. "You look good, John."

The cherry of his cigarette flares as red as John's cheeks.

# # #

For all that John liked to fly, Gale has never known him to be flighty. And yet it's the only way Gale can think to describe how he flutters and frets the first three days that Gale is here. Gale asks him only twice if he'd rather he wasn't, and each time John shakes his head and pinches his elbow through his sleeve and offers to take him on another walk to show him another place he's discovered. Winter was rough, the snow deep, but spring came early and so did the animals—black bears, mainly, but deer and bald eagles and the occasional wolf. He fishes. He swims and sunbathes. He picks wild raspberries.

Gale bakes a raspberry pie with Crisco in the crust for the bridge game, and John carries it for him down the road in a wooden toolbox emptied of tools. Gale has never known John to be shy, modest, or retiring, and yet he makes a good show of all three while he introduces Gale to the two men who live together. (From the way John's cheeks blush, he knows it's not the platonic kind of living

together, and from the way he peeks at Gale, he wants to make sure Gale doesn't disapprove.) It's not clear if the other guests who arrive to play bridge are fully aware, especially considering they're in Utah, but if Theo and Dennis trust them to be here, Gale will, too. They're not much older than John, two women who met as nurses in the Red Cross and say they live together to save money. Aurelia's grandma has a summer cottage nearby, and Gladys doesn't want to move back home where her parents insist she marry and start birthing babies.

Then Gale sees Aurelia's hand linger on Gladys's thigh just a touch too long. He notices Theo and Dennis watching him for his reaction. He's never been around queer people—at least, he doesn't think he has; he's never thought to look before—but he thinks about how he'd want someone to react if they saw him touch John like that. He thinks about how Ev and Crank didn't so much as flinch at the sight of Gale sitting with his arm around Marge's shoulders. He thinks about Marge not even batting an eye at the thought John might be to Gale what Marge used to be and might have been had the war never happened.

When Aurelia pulls her hand away, cheeks flushing pink, and Gladys peeks at Gale, the tips of her brown ears ruddy, he doesn't react—doesn't smile at them, doesn't pretend not to have noticed, doesn't act as if anything's out of the ordinary. He simply sips his lemonade and listens to John recount some story from training in 1941.

At some point, Gale finds himself in the kitchen with Theo, carrying a tray of empty lemonade glasses for refills. And while Theo slices lemons and Gale finds an ice tray in the icebox, Theo muses, "You notice Aurelia and Gladys are especially touchy tonight?"

Flicking the toothpick from the right side of his mouth to the left, Gale plucks ice cubes out of their little molds and drops a pair into each glass. "Considerin' this is the first time I've met them, I can't say if it's more so than usual."

Theo grunts, brushing his salt-and-pepper hair out of his eyes, a dark brown hidden behind Coke-bottle glasses. "We have a little flock here," he says, dropping lemon slices into the pitcher. "It's quiet and peaceful, and we like it like that. We like Bucky, too. You give us the chance, I'm sure we'll like you as well."

Gale looks up, pressing his tongue against the toothpick tip in his mouth. This sounds suspiciously like the talk Marge's father gave to Gale the first time he picked her up for a date. Theo might be old enough to be John's father, but it's not the kind of talk Gale imagined

getting from John's bridge friends. And yet John could charm the stripes off a bee with little more than a smile. It should come as no surprise it's happened here, too.

"And," Theo continues in the silence, stirring the lemonade with a long wooden spoon, "Bucky talks about you every chance he gets. It's why I trusted his judgement when he asked to bring you here tonight. Not everyone could make it, but we're all…"

"Queer," Gale says into the silence Theo leaves hanging.

Theo glances at him overtop his glasses. "Hmm."

"I'm realizing I might be," Gale says. "Took me a minute to get here, but…"

John laughs at something Gladys says, and Gale can't stop the smile. John's flirting with her, because he'll flirt with anything that moves, but Gale knows John doesn't mean it the way he might to some girl he met in a pub in England. He's sure Gladys and Aurelia know that, too.

"Well." Gale looks back at Theo, who rinses the wooden spoon and sets it on the towel by the sink to dry. "It's John."

Theo smirks at that. "Crisco is good in more than just pies," he says, enigmatically, and leads the way back into the party with the pitcher before Gale can ask what he means.

# # #

Gale learns John still has nightmares because Gale is already awake thanks to his own. It's been two weeks since he showed up uninvited, and every night he's slept without waking until morning. It was foolish to think his nightmares might have ended simply because he's in John's orbit again, considering they existed even when trapped in a stalag mere feet apart.

But Gale creaked down the ladder of the attic (it must have been where Ev and his brother slept as children, considering it's not actually an attic but a spare bedroom where Gale volunteered to sleep rather than kick John out of the master bedroom, even though John offered) to pour a glass of water in the kitchen and sit down on the swinging sofa on the back porch. It's where John finds him, fumbling a cigarette out of the pack as he lets the back door creak shut. He doesn't speak when he sits down beside Gale, doesn't speak when Gale offers his half-full glass of water, doesn't speak after he drains it dry.

When he fumbles the lighter, too, Gale takes it and flicks it, cupping the flame in his palm. John's eyes meet his, cigarette caught between his lips, illuminated from on high by the light of the moon. Gale just raises his brows. John's inhale is audible, and it shakes, but he leans in all the same. His eyes only leave Gale's when he needs to find the flame with the cigarette. When he pulls away, his cheek brushes Gale's fingertips. Gale clicks the lighter closed but doesn't surrender it, choosing instead to flick it over his knuckles like he used to do with quarters.

They sit in silence for the time it takes John to finish half the cigarette, ashing it over a bucket of sand collected for, perhaps, this purpose. Gale wasn't sure until now.

Then John says, "They went away for me, too. For a bit."

Gale hums and tucks a toothpick into his mouth, swinging the sofa with a flex of his thighs. John raises his feet to the seat, elbows hooked around his knees, cigarette pinched between index and middle finger. Fireflies blink in the yard. Water laps at the shore, hushed. Gale's stuck his feet in the lake, but he hasn't gone for a swim yet. Not many people have arrived for the summer season, since it's still a bit cold—especially at night; goosebumps scatter over Gale's bare arms—but Theo has informed him it won't be long before people come and go like the tides.

"What are they, for you?" Gale asks at last, tucking his hands under his armpits. The chains faintly creak with each backward push, and quietly groan on each forward swing.

"Usually running through a forest," John says, ashing the cigarette again. "S'where the kraut cops found me, before I was brought to the dulag for interrogation. I was—I'd played dead, after I woke up in the wagon, and got away while the krauts dug a grave for the fellas I was with. The ones who'd, uh, been killed."

He scrubs at his cheek. There's nothing there, but Gale knows about phantoms.

"Was it that tonight?" he asks.

"Nah, was already awake when I heard you get up. The ladder's a bit creaky."

"I'll fix it tomorrow."

John shrugs. “No rush.”

“Awake from a nightmare?”

“I have trouble sleeping. Doc told me it’s just a symptom of shellshock that should fade the further I get from the war, but—” He takes a drag from his cigarette, holds the smoke in his lungs, lets it out through his nose. When he scratches his chest, he rolls his head to look at Gale. “What about you?”

“I don’t really remember,” Gale says. “Usually I think I’m sleepin’ fine, and then I’ll hear something—a dog barking, or a car drivin’ past, once even Marge just gettin’ up to use the bathroom—and my brain will make the sound into flak shattering a window and wake me up. The adrenaline doesn’t fade for hours.”

“And that leads you to the bathtub?”

He forgot he told John about that. The letters still sit on the side table by the front door, so it must have been an earlier one, before John stopped replying. For a moment, he’s not sure he can verbalize it, but then he looks out into the darkness, so whole he can see the full sweep of the stars far above. “It’s…small. It’s the closest thing I can find to feelin’ like a cockpit. It doesn’t always help, since the tub back home doesn’t have a view of the window, so I sometimes feel like I’m trapped instead, but…” He tried explaining it to Marge once. She tried to understand. But she’s never been inside a B-17, has never flown through a storm of flak, and thus could never properly visualize it. She simply recognized it helped Gale to feel small.

John, though, just nods. “You can use the bathtub here, if you need to.”

“Thought about it. Then I decided I’d try something new.”

“The new help?”

Gale looks at John, who’s already looking back. “I think it might.”

John hides his smile behind the hand he brings to his mouth. The cigarette illuminates the tip of his nose. “Think it might, too, Buck.”

“We’re not extinct yet, John.”

“More’s the pity.”

In the morning, when Gale descends the ladder out of the attic to the smell and sound of bacon sizzling on the stove, the letters are gone from the table by the door. In a glass vase on the dining room table beside Steve the chicken is a bundle of wildflowers. John is singing *Blue Skies*, off-key and out of tune, and when he spies Gale, his smile is so bright it hurts.

# # #

The first letter Gale gets from John in months is tucked beneath the vase of wildflowers on the dining room table. He might have missed it, had he not stooped to bury his face in the flowers to take a sniff, as he's done every day since John picked them. The first bouquet was mostly yellow. These are mostly purple, save for the occasional blue.

Then Gale spies the paper and snatches it up so fast the vase wobbles. He holds it steady with one hand and unfolds the letter with the other.

Dear Buck,

How do you look? Aurelia's trimmed my hair a few times. She's got the softest fingers, don't you think? I even like the scent of the green shit she keeps her combs in, when I usually hate it everywhere else. (Though why I'm telling you that is beyond me. You already know.) I'd marry her for the scalp massages alone if it wouldn't make Gladys challenge me to a duel.

Anyway, Theo stopped by to ask for help on Dennis's roof. Some animal crashed through it last night and they want to patch it up before the storm blows in later this week. No need to stop by, but I didn't want you to think I'd been abducted by aliens when you got back.

Bucky

P.S. Because I know you'll stop by anyway, how do leftovers sound for dinner? I won't feel like cooking after climbing off the roof, and you won't have time if you come here, and we didn't finish the meatloaf.

P.P.S. I stuck a few beers in the icebox. They should be cold by now, so nab them on your way out, will you? Mwah mwah mwah!

P.P.P.S. You didn't happen to bring Marge's lipstick, did you? I looked through your stuff upstairs (I knew you wouldn't mind) but I couldn't find it.

P.P.P.P.S. Why do you have a tin of Crisco under your bed?

P.P.P.P.P.S. How many postscripts is too many?

P.P.P.P.P.P.S. If it's a dodo bird that broke their roof, I promise I'll keep it caged until you get here.

Gale's mouth hurts from the size of his smile as he reads the letter three times over before folding and tucking it into the breast pocket of his serge shirt. He finds the beers in the icebox, then ducks right back out the door. The bowl of the sky is big and blue, speckled with fluffy white clouds. A storm might be due in a couple days, but you wouldn't know it to look up now.

As per usual, Gale hears John before he sees him, talking loudly on account of Dennis being on the ground with his one deaf ear. Theo's back is to the gravel drive Gale crunches his way down, holding something steady on the roof while John goes to town with a hammer. Theo and Dennis's cabin isn't much larger than Ev's, but it's certainly older. The wood is darker than the aspens around it, and flowerboxes perch in each and every window. A bird feeder in the yard finds itself occupied by jays. The next time Gale and John make a run into town for groceries, maybe he'll stop by the hardware store to look for one. He doesn't think Ev will mind.

Gale walks louder the closer he gets to Dennis, really grinding the gravel under his trooper boots. Dennis glances over his shoulder, brows raised, and then smiles as Gale holds out a beer upon arrival. It's still in the sixties despite it being well into the latter half of June. Gale isn't complaining. He's always liked this kind of weather, like autumn's come early. (At least when he doesn't have to suffer it in a stalag.)

"Bucky tellin' more tall tales?" Gale asks Dennis, since John has yet to notice him.

"He's reminding us he's the one who climbed the flagpole to tear down the Nazi flag in the stalag," Dennis says.

Gale snorts. It's a favorite of John's. He'll tell it to anyone willing to listen, whether or not they've already heard it. "That old chestnut, eh?"

"Well." Dennis sips his beer. "Theo demanded they swap places, after Bucky nearly fell backward off the roof."

"Sounds about right." Gale glances at the sweating beers in his hand. It'll take far more than one of these to get John drunk (even though

he's been cutting back on how much he drinks), but a bit of caution wouldn't go amiss. "Think I'll save these for when he's done, in that case."

"That might be best."

"There he is!"

The shout draws Gale's eyes back to the roof. John kneels opposite Theo, arms raised like he's just jumped out of a cake. A hammer's in one hand, a bundle of nails in the other. Theo glances over his shoulder at Gale, and when Gale waves, Theo just grunts. Despite that first conversation in the kitchen over lemonade, Gale has since learned it's Dennis who's the more talkative of the pair (which isn't saying much, considering Dennis hardly talks at all). Gale's also learned Dennis has a habit of picking up strays. When Ev was a kid, he and his brother would often talk Dennis's ear off, too, at least until Theo showed up to chase them off home for dinner.

Dennis would just sit them down with a bowl each of peapods to be shelled and listen to them chatter.

"Those for me?" John shouts.

"If you're good," Gale says.

"Hey now, I'm always good!"

"Says the man who nearly fell off the roof."

"Dennis!" John barks. "You promised you wouldn't tell anyone!"

Dennis shrugs. "He's not anyone."

Gale snorts. John guffaws. Theo has to grab him by the shirt before he falls. Gale is so in love he feels, frankly, stupid with it.

# # #

John convinces Gale to go with him to the bar after their most recent grocery run. Gale can't really think of a reason to say no—none of their groceries are frozen, and it's not as though he hasn't accompanied John to bars before. He usually prefers to go with him, just to keep an eye on everyone around them, to make sure they don't take offense to John's flagrant friendly touching. And they're in Gale's car tonight, anyway, seeing as how John's tire is still flat and neither

of them has gotten around to changing it. Gale at least convinced him to prop the truck up on a jack.

To no one's surprise, John has made friends of the regulars, who bemoan the fact they haven't seen him in months. Gale orders a ginger beer, and when the regulars look like they'd like to poke fun at the notion a man might not like to drink, Gale just raises his brows and takes a sip. They look away, so Gale settles back in his chair and watches the night unfold.

It's a small bar—the sign out front called it a saloon, which John took great joy in pointing out, to which Gale reminded him he grew up in Wyoming where *every* bar is called a saloon—the walls dark wood, the booths red vinyl, the black barstools squeaky as they spin. A few girls give John long looks, and one even says, "Hi John," but John is nothing more than polite. Gale wouldn't mind gloating that the only person John's going home with tonight is him, but he can't imagine that being received well. This isn't their little community of queers on Bear Lake.

John introduced his friends, but the names went in one ear and out the other. Gale doesn't intend to make them his friends—he has friends and doesn't need more, and in any case, these men don't seem to be more than the type you turn to for a night of painting the town so red you regret it the next morning—and thus gives up on trying to remember.

It's just as well. One second Gale is leaving the booth to use the restroom, the next he's emerging to find a pair of cowboys throwing John's friends out. John, meanwhile, sits on a barstool with the girls flocked around him. He's holding a tumbler of ice to his left eye and a handkerchief to his nose, and despite the blood, he's flirting, grin easy and bright.

"I was gone for three damn minutes, Bucky," Gale grits out, shouldering past the girls. "The fuck happened?"

John smirks. "Nothing I couldn't handle."

Gale glances at the cowboys, who linger by the doors as if to keep someone from coming in. Or, perhaps, to keep John from leaving. He glances at the barkeeper, who's sweeping up what might be a shattered lowball glass. Finally, he glances at the girls. The one who knew John's name watches them with her fingernail between her teeth, corners of her eyes pinched.

“He just said something stupid,” John says, drawing Gale’s gaze back. He’s swaying on the stool, though whether that’s from whatever resulted in a black eye or the fact he’s had several whiskeys tonight, Gale can’t say. Perhaps both.

“About?”

“Doesn’t matter.” John staggers to his feet. Gale latches a hand around his elbow to keep him steady. “I took care of it.”

“John—”

“I took care of it, Gale.” He sounds briefly sober, so Gale closes his mouth and glances at the barkeeper, miming for the bill. The barkeeper mouths “Don’t worry about it.”

Gale has no idea what to make of that, but he simply nods and shoulders John toward the door. The cowboys step aside. The one in the black hat leans toward Gale’s ear and says, “They deserved it, whatever the fuck it was. We all like Bucky here.”

“Gentlemen,” Gale says and hauls John out the door.

John sulks on the drive back to the cabin, the tumbler held to his eye even after the ice has melted. He keeps sniffing, loud and exaggerated, though his nose no longer bleeds. When they pull into the driveway, he tries to insist upon helping Gale carry in the groceries, but Gale says, “They’re not gonna melt,” and makes him sit down on the closed lid of the toilet while he fetches the first aid kit from under the kitchen sink.

“Stop pokin’ at it,” Gale snaps when he returns to find John peering at himself in the mirror, prodding at the bridge of his nose.

“It hurts.”

“No shit, Sherlock.” Gale nudges John’s hand away from his face. John pouts at him while he dampens a washcloth and nudges his chin up, angling it into the light of the naked bulb over the mirror. Carefully, he wipes away the dried blood, and wonders—not for the first time—who did this for John when he arrived in the stalag.

“Sorry,” Gale says when John hisses a breath that reeks of whiskey as Gale takes his turn poking and prodding at John’s nose. “Don’t think it’s broken. You’re lucky, Major. Your good looks remain intact.”

John flushes to the tips of his ears and looks down and away. When Gale pinches his chin and makes him raise his head once more, John closes his eyes. It's helpful, since it allows Gale to clean the cut over his eyebrow. He'd rather not think about why John doesn't want to look at him, not with what he suspects the men might have said to get John to take a swing. They were his friends, after all.

"They said somethin' about you," John says while Gale dampens a cotton ball with antiseptic.

"That so?" Gale muses.

"About your—About the fact you don't drink."

"Well, I don't."

"Said it made sense, what with your hips bein' so…er, tidy."

Gale pauses, cotton ball pressed to the cut across John's eyebrow, and glances down at his hips. He's always been skinny. It's never been something he's found shame in. "S'pose that's one word for 'em. Don't see why that merited you punching them."

"Buck, they meant—" John sighs. "It was meant as an insult."

"I've been called worse things than a non-drinker with tidy hips."

"That include bein' a queer?"

Gale goes still. When John looks at him, Gale's alarmed by the fact his pupils look too large for such bright light. With a frown, he drops the cotton ball into the trashcan and fetches the small penlight from the kit.

"Follow the light," Gale says. "Need to make sure you're not concussed."

John does not follow the light. "Why, 'cause I know what a queer is?"

"No, because your pupils—John, would you just—"

"You never been called that before?" John says, his voice the kind of fragile it goes when he's trying, very hard, to show absolutely no emotion. "'Cause I have, and I never had someone to protect me when I was."

"John." Gale clicks the penlight off. He wishes they could have this

conversation when John is sober, when Gale doesn't get a whiff of whiskey every time John exhales. It calls to mind too many nights before Gale was old enough to be left home alone, and too many mornings when he found his father passed out on the front stoop. (He'd be slumped on the inside of the front door if he was lucky. At least the neighbors wouldn't see him, then.)

"It should bother you," John says before Gale can gather what he wants to say.

"Well, it doesn't."

"But—"

"John." He covers John's mouth with his hand. John stares at him, wide-eyed. "I *am* queer. It's not because I don't drink. It's not because my hips are 'tidy.' It's not something I feel the need to be ashamed of. Marge certainly didn't seem to think I needed to."

John's eyebrows fly toward his hairline.

"Yes, Marge knows. Or, well, I'm sure she figured it out. She's known me since we were kids, Bucky. And anyway, I like girls, too, for the record." He huffs a quiet laugh at the way John blinks and shifts his hand to pat John's cheek, just once, before dropping it to his side. "But, I mean, you don't think Theo and Dennis need to feel shame for being queer, do you? Or Aurelia and Gladys? Why should I feel ashamed of it if they don't?"

When John doesn't speak, Gale clicks the penlight back on and raises it. John follows the light this time, and while Gale is no expert, he doesn't think John has a concussion. He's gentle with his head all the same.

"And for that matter," Gale says while he's repacking the kit and John has yet to breathe a word, "it should never have been used against you that way, either."

John inhales, hand finding Gale's hip. Gale looks down at it as John's fingers hook in his belt loop, and then looks up at John's face. He knows what John wants. It's the same thing he's wanted for far longer than he's even acknowledged. But he doesn't want it when John reeks of whiskey. He doesn't want it when John might not remember. He doesn't want it when John still reels in the aftermath of that fight.

"John, no," Gale says, quieter than he means to, and touches the back

of John's hand there on his hip. "Not—not like this."

John yanks his hand free like Gale burned him. He stammers as he gets to his feet, avoiding Gale's gaze, dodging Gale's hand when he reaches out. By the time Gale steps out of the bathroom, John's bedroom door is shut.

"John," he says, but the words stick in his throat like powdered eggs.

# # #

Gale writes John letters, but he has no idea if he reads them after Gale tucks them under the door of his room. For five days, he only knows John is still in the house because food is still eaten in the fridge, but Gale never sees him.

Dear Bucky,

I finished Guys and Dolls last night. What was that question you wanted to ask me about it?

Hugs and kisses,

Buck

Dear Bucky,

I found that record you were looking for when I drove to Logan this morning for that bird feeder we ordered. It's on the dining room table. (The record, not the bird feeder. That's in the front yard.)

XOXO,

Buck

P.S. How's this shade of red?

Dear Bucky,

Why didn't you tell me the tub doesn't plug? I've called a repairman, so if you hear someone slamming around in there, don't worry about burglars.

Buck

Dear Bucky,

Do you think Blakely would hate me if I painted the attic a different shade of orange? Maybe a nice green? Or blue? I like blue. (You'll have to come with me to look at paint chips. I want a blue to match your eyes. Never have seen a color like it before, but we'll make do.)

Buck

It's somewhere after midnight on the sixth day since John quite literally shut him out when Gale jerks awake to the shock of flak. Heart pounding, he curls his fingers into the sheets, breathes in the cool air drifting through the attic windows thrown open to the night, and waits.

There's a thud from below, then a muffled curse, and Gale exhales long and slow, listening to John stumble around. There's the clink of glass, the splash of water, then more stumbling footsteps back into the bedroom. Gale listens, breath held, as the springs in the mattress squeak after John drops back onto it. He hears a *click*, *click*, *click*, a lighter struggling to spit out a flame, another curse, a soft thump.

Then silence, but the fraught kind. It calls to mind the first nights John spent in Gale's hut in the stalag, when Gale could only be certain John slept by watching the rise and fall of his chest. He's tired, and his heart won't stop pounding, and the crack of flak is still whistling in his ears, and he just fucking misses John, so he throws off the sheets, descends the ladder, and slips down the hall to the door. It's been left cracked open.

"Sorry," John says before Gale can speak. "Thought I might've woken you. Flak and all."

It loosens the knot in Gale's chest, one he struggled to breathe around every minute since that failure of a moment in the bathroom. He presses his hand to the door and slowly pushes it open, but lingers there on the threshold. The tossed lighter sits on the floor beneath the window. Wind kicks at the curtains, painting the hardwood with moonlight. John lays flat on his back, staring at the ceiling. He taps the unlit cigarette against the purse of his lips.

"Can't sleep?" Gale asks.

"Too busy running through that fucking forest."

“Can I—” Gale stops, words sticking in his throat. In the wake of that conversation in the bathroom, he’s no longer sure how to bridge the gap. “D’you want company?”

A listless shrug. Gale steps inside, and when John doesn’t move, doesn’t cease the tap dance of the cigarette on his lips, Gale crosses the three steps to the bed and sits, gingerly, on the edge. The springs squeak. He winces. John snorts. He’s shirtless, in just his skivvies, and Gale can’t help but drink in the broad expanse of his chest and shoulders. His skin is all milky-silver in the moonlight. Gale wonders if it will taste the same as beads of water.

John inhales and shifts, so Gale turns his gaze to the bedside table. It’s still scattered with cigarette packs and lighters, the ashtray still a duck. But it also now holds the letters Gale has slipped under the door, each one open.

“The red’s a nice shade,” John says.

Gale finds John already looking back, forearm resting across his forehead. The cigarette pokes out from between his index and middle fingers. “Hoped you’d like it,” Gale says. “The lady at the counter asked me to describe what my girl looked like, so she could pick out a shade to match. I told her it was a gift, y’know?”

“Blond hair, then?” John asks. “Brown eyes?”

“Nah,” he says, tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth. He forces himself to swallow, his fists to uncurl. John’s comforter is softer than he expected it to be. “Black hair. Blue eyes. Freckles. Mustache.”

A smile spreads across John’s mouth, slow to form, but bright in its completion. “You did not tell her she had a mustache.”

“Maybe not.” Gale shrugs, picking at a loose thread in the comforter. “Rest is true, though.”

John snorts, eyes drifting to the window. But the smile stays. He shifts on the bed, planting his feet flat, knees bent. Gale leans tentatively back against his thigh, and when John holds him up, he lets his weight settle. He rests his head on John’s knee, listening to him breathe, listening to the wind, listening to the lake in the distance. The storm wasn’t as bad as everyone feared, but it dumped a lot of water. Gale’s half-tempted to go swimming, no matter the chill.

“I can write you a letter,” Gale says.

“You have been.”

“I mean right now.” He rolls his head to look at John. “Without paper.”

John shrugs. “S’a free country.”

“Dear Bucky,” he says. “Don’t you go extinct on me, Major. The world needs its unicorn, and so do I.”

John purses his lips toward his still-bruised nose, doesn’t blink for a long, long moment. Then he says, in a voice that croaks, “Quack.”

Gale smiles. “Hugs and kisses, Buck.”

“Short letter.”

“P.S. In case it needs to be said, I said, ‘Not like this,’ not ‘never.’”

John’s breath hitches. He doesn’t look at Gale.

“P.P.S. Remember how I grew up with a dad who drank? I smelled whiskey on his breath far too often to want to taste it on yours.”

John’s hand curls and flexes, arm still draped over his forehead.

“P.P.P.S. My hands are shaking. I might scratch out what I just said, but—”

“No, don’t—”

“I’m here ’cause you’re here, remember? I’m here because I want to be where you are.”

John looks at him at last and smiles, in a helpless sort of way.

“P.P.P.P.S. Dummy.”

“Name-calling, Gale? Really?”

“P.P.P.P.P.S. These postscripts are getting out of hand. Think I might have missed a post in there somewhere.”

John tosses aside the cigarette and tugs Gale down onto the bed, wrapping around him like they did when sharing a bunk in the stalag. Gale doesn’t feel particularly tired, the adrenaline still shaking through his veins, but he’s happy to act the pillow for John if he is. It

might be hard to run through a forest when he's got Gale in his arms.

"P.P.P.P.P.P.P.S. I'm craving raspberry jam. If you want to go berry picking with me tomorrow, I'll try my hand at making some."

John smooshes his nose into the back of Gale's head. "You used one too many posts."

"Is that a no to berry-picking, then?"

"Use your fingers to keep track, Buck. Here, look, I'll show you—one, two, three, f-UCK. Gale! Didn't your mom ever teach you not to bite your elders? I swear, you and your fucking oral fixation, Jesus Christ. I'll keep my fingers to myself."

# # #

It rains again and doesn't let up for two days, but they go berry-picking anyway. Dennis gave Gale tips on making jam (in the same dry tone of voice he explained what else Crisco could be used for) and any spare mason jars he had in his kitchen, and Gale and John spend days sticky with raspberries and sugar.

When the sun finally breaks through the clouds, John drags Gale to the lake and shoves him in the instant he's down to his skivvies. Gale shouts on the way in and splutters on the way out, and when he lunges for John, John beats him to the punch by cannonballing in right over his head. The splash throws Gale back against the pier. He laughs.

The water is as cold as expected, but it's brisk in an eye-opening way, pleasant and bright. They're clearly not the only ones of this opinion, since people stand on every beach Gale looks at. At least they have this pier to themselves.

Aurelia and Gladys stop to say hi on their way past to their own private pier while Gale's lying on his back on his and John's, feet splashing in the water. John, arms crossed over the pier by Gale's knees, kicks his legs to keep his body level with the surface of the water. Maybe it's some tactic to get the wiggles out after nearly a week languishing in bed, then a week slaving away over a hot stove.

After Gladys and Aurelia say their goodbyes, Gale pokes his toothpick back into his mouth, arms crossed under his head, eyes closed against the sunshine. He can feel John looking at him, and he's happy to be looked at, content to bask in the glow of John's attention. It feels

good, even if John isn't yet ready for the kinds of next steps Dennis told Gale he could expect. Gale is happy to wait. (He took notes and has studied them as thoroughly as he did flight manuals. It doesn't hurt to be prepared. After all, it's clear John's been around the block a few times, but the only person Gale has ever had sex with is Marge, and he's only been inside her twice. He's not too green to know her body and John's are the same except where they're not.) Birds sing while they ride the updrafts. Kids laugh. Dogs bark. For once, Gale doesn't mind the ambient noise.

"Buck," John says.

"Bucky," Gale says back.

"Take a breath."

"I'm quite happy where I am, thanks ever so."

"I said"—hands close on Gale's knees—"take a breath."

Gale takes a breath.

The world goes quiet when he sinks below the surface. John's fingers grip his shoulders, so he opens his eyes. John's face is blurry, but not so much that Gale can't see his grin, bright white beneath the riot of black curls suspended by clear water. Nimble fingers pluck the toothpick out from the corner of Gale's mouth and tuck it behind John's ear.

A mouth finds his, lips a shock of heat in the chill of the lake. Gale laughs, or tries to without swallowing water, and presses his hand to John's cheek and kisses him back, their noses bumping. Underwater, the two spare inches of height John boasts don't matter, so Gale wraps his arm around one of the posts of the pier jutting down into the lakebed to keep himself from floating away. John's hand slides to the nape of Gale's neck and his lips slip over Gale's in a clumsy way that shouldn't be as dizzying as it is. (Though that could just be the oxygen deprivation.) A tease of a tongue has Gale's heart kicking in his chest, has him surging closer, and their chests collide, a slick drag of skin that makes Gale gasp.

He surges back to the surface and hacks up a lung after narrowly avoiding a collision with the bottom of the pier. John joins him with laughter he does nothing to hide while patting Gale's back in commiseration—it's certainly not for help, the thuds hard enough to rattle Gale's bones—and somewhere within the coughs and the gasps

Gale laughs, too. Their pier is secluded from the crowds, and they're tucked safely in the shade it casts, but Gale still doesn't risk more than pressing his forehead to John's chest. John's fingers nudge into Gale's hair, a secret for them alone. A postscript on a letter.

"It's the closest we'll get to kissing in public."

Gale snorts. "You couldn't wait 'til we were behind closed doors?"

"Sure, I could've. I just didn't want to."

Gale looks up at him, his eyes bluer than the sky. Their treading feet slip and slide underwater, toes nudging ankles, footsie like Gale's never played it before. He can feel the heat of John's body, radiating off him like the iron cookstove in the hut in the stalag in the war. John smiles, like he knows what Gale is thinking, or at least can guess, or simply because he wants to and the reason doesn't matter. (Gale is the reason. It's a realization that hits like one of John's slaps to his back.)

"Take a breath, John," Gale says.

# # #

Gale shuts the back door by shoving John up against it and finally—fucking *finally*—getting his mouth on John's skin. He tastes of salt, and fresh water, and the sunscreen Gale insisted he put on, and it's enough to make Gale weak in the knees. He plants one hand flat to the door, palms John's hip with the other. John laughs, because of course he does, his fingers finding their way back into Gale's hair. Fingernails scratch over Gale's scalp, scattering goosebumps.

"The first time I saw you after I came here," Gale says, kissing John's shoulder, then his neck, then his pulse. He presses his nose there, breathing in the smell of clean sweat and sunscreen, and can't help but grin at John's shiver. "This was all I wanted to do."

"That so?" John muses, pulse jackrabbiting under Gale's lips.

"Hmm. S'the first time I called myself queer, watching you walk up the path. Knew a straight man wouldn't wanna do this." Gale drags his teeth over the column of John's neck, delighted when it makes John shudder, his hips rolling forward into Gale's. They're still in their skivvies, clothes dumped on the porch, skin warm from the sun as they scurried back to their cabin before need outweighed caution.

“Used to think about this during the war,” John says, head dropped back to let Gale do what he will to his neck. He doesn’t warn Gale against leaving a mark, but Gale doesn’t need the warning. He’ll simply mark him where no one else can see. “Putting that lipstick on, smearing it all over your shoulders and your hips and your thighs with my mouth.”

“I used to kiss the lip prints,” Gale says into the dip below John’s ear. “The lipstick was still wet in Algeria.”

John groans, that hand in Gale’s hair going tight as he drags Gale’s mouth up to his. The kisses they shared in the lake were chaste, the water a barrier but still not one to mitigate all risk. Here behind closed doors, Gale can press his tongue into John’s mouth and finally taste.

Perhaps this is what it feels like to burn.

He drops his elbows to the door, framing John’s head with his forearms as John’s jaw rolls with his hips, his growing erection dragging sensation against Gale’s cock. Shameless, Gale lets John hold his weight, his right foot between both of John’s, their cocks aligned, and slips one hand down to tease his fingertips at John’s waistband. John makes a sound like assent, teeth catching Gale’s bottom lip, so Gale tucks his hand in and clutches hard at John’s ass, hauling his hips away from the door to grind them together.

“*Gale*,” he gasps, hooking one arm around Gale’s shoulders as he drops his head back. “Fuck me, do that again.”

Gale does and drags his lips down John’s neck to his chest, licking and biting everywhere he can reach as John moves in time with him, fingers clutching hard to Gale’s shoulders. Gale flattens his free palm to John’s back, angling him up toward his mouth, and closes his lips around one nipple, sucking hard. John’s body arches upward, one knee hooking around Gale’s hips, so it’s up to the door and Gale himself to keep John from falling. Gale laughs, helpless, and flicks his tongue over John’s nipple until it pebbles.

He bites the other.

“Fuck!” John shoves away from the door and bears Gale onto the floor, hand closing on the back of Gale’s head to protect it from the hardwood as he lands.

Gale has had John’s undivided attention before—when there was

some maneuver in a bomber he couldn't perfect; when John was drunk and pestering Gale with questions to linger over the answers; when they were folded together in a bunk in the stalag, writing letters across backs—but never like this. Never when John closes one hand around Gale's wrists, lashing them together, and presses them into the floor over his head. Never when John's body holds him down, the heavy weight of his erection sliding against Gale's through the damp fabric of their skivvies. Never when Gale can only say John's name, dragging air into lungs that feel too tight.

It takes a moment for Gale to realize John is talking, smearing words with wet lips and sharp teeth over Gale's chest: "Can I—want you in my mouth—fuck, Gale, the way you taste, wanna make you feel so fucking good—"

"Yeah," Gale says, tugging against John's grip on his wrists, and John lets him go, flattens that hand to the floor by Gale's head instead. "Yeah, lemme just—"

When he shoves his skivvies past his hips, John's groan is unlike anything Gale has heard before, dragged up from deep underground, hunger and want finally freed. John pulls Gale's skivvies down and off Gale's legs, palms Gale's hips, and shoves his nose against the base of Gale's cock. Marge has done this for Gale before, but if he had to put a word to how she went about it, it would be…*polite*. She did it not necessarily because she enjoyed it (he always went down on her first) but because it made him feel good.

By comparison, John is starving. He presses his open mouth to Gale's balls, drags a hot tongue over them, up his shaft to the tip, where he dips his tongue into the slit. Gale's feet stick to the hardwood, his fingers scrabbling for purchase but only finding the little rug by the sink. He curls his fists into it all the same when John lets saliva pool, drip onto Gale's cock, and smears it down with one hand, tip to base. His mouth follows after his fist, swallowing Gale like this is his last supper. Gale knows he isn't as experienced as John, even though he's not entirely green either, but nothing could have prepared him for the depth of John's hunger.

"I'm not—" Gale stops, panting, as John drags his mouth back up and swirls his tongue around Gale's cockhead. "Won't last."

John shakes his head, hot breaths curling over Gale's cock with each lazy pump of his fist. "This won't be the only time, right?"

"*Fuck*." Gale frees one hand from the abused rug to palm John's cheek, the rasp of stubble a delight. "God, don't you get it, John? I'm yours. It's the best thing I've ever been."

John makes a sound somewhere between a sob and a laugh, and he croaks, "Then come in my mouth," and swallows Gale down once more. Gale doesn't disappoint.

He hasn't even caught his breath before he's tugging at John's arms, hauling him up, up, up to kiss him, licking the taste of his own come out of his mouth. With his free hand, he shoves down John's skivvies and palms John's cock, using precome to slick the way. John's been leaking steadily, making for an easy slide, and he lets Gale set the pace until his movements go sloppy, each thrust jerky. Then he shoves Gale's hand away, straddles Gale's waist, and quickly strokes himself off, come painting Gale's chest white.

Gale catches John's fall, one outstretched arm pillowing John's head as they lay side by side, catching their breaths. Gale tilts his head at the same time John tilts his, and when their eyes meet, Gale can't help but laugh.

"That was a long time coming," John says.

"Not really."

John snorts, and then laughs, and then curls into Gale and kisses him stupid.

# # #

"Think the jam is ready to try?" John asks from his spot on the floor, one of his legs hooked over both of Gale's. Gale is still naked as the day he was born, and John kicked off his own skivvies after getting up for a towel to wipe the come off Gale's chest before it dried.

"Certainly fuckin' hope so," Gale says, eyes closed against the afternoon sunlight spilling into the kitchen. "I promised to bring a couple jars to bridge tomorrow."

The click of a lighter proves John has somehow found a cigarette. Gale turns his head, watching him inhale and exhale smoke. Perhaps he senses Gale's gaze, since he turns his head to look back. After a moment, eyes locked, he holds the cigarette out.

"Won't be makin' this a habit, mind," Gale says even as he brings it to

his mouth.

“They’re better after sex, anyway,” John says.

Gale coughs, eyes watering, but he’s never been a quitter so he tries again. It doesn’t burn so much the second time. He offers it back to John, who blushes even as he takes it. Gale snorts. “You just had my cock in your mouth, and now you’re blushin’ about sharin’ a cigarette?”

“It’s different” is all John says.

“If you say so.” Gale reaches out, brushing frizzy curls off John’s forehead. “Can I ask you something? And don’t you dare say I just did.”

John smirks. “Sure, Buck. Ask away.”

“Why’d you stop writin’ me?”

“After the war, I thought you—I thought we couldn’t—” He sighs, closing his eyes, and hooks the cigarette to hang out of the corner of his mouth. With his newly freed hand, he pats across the floor until he finds Gale’s head. Then he buries his fingers in his hair. “I never wrote you because I thought it’d be the only way to get over you. Then I got your list, and it was like picking up a habit again. Not a bad one, maybe, but one I should’ve kicked. And then I got that last one you sent me before I stopped replying, you remember?”

When John peeks at him, Gale shakes his head.

“You mentioned Marge’s folks askin’ about wedding plans. Dennis thought I needed to stop writing if I hoped to get over you. I gave it a try. Didn’t work, really, but I at least didn’t send you any of ’em.” John tongues the cigarette and shrugs one shoulder. “I’d give them to you now, but I burned them. It felt…symbolic, I guess.”

Gale rolls onto his side, pressing his hand flat to John’s sternum. His heart still pounds a staccato. “Tell me what they said.”

John’s gaze travels the length of Gale’s body like a physical touch. “I just did.”

Gale straddles John’s hips and plucks the cigarette out of his mouth, bringing it to his own lips once more. “Write me a letter, John.”

John starts with Gale's thighs.

# # #

Bridge the next night is no different than any other night, save for when Gale licks his thumb and wipes raspberry jam from the corner of John's mouth. John blushes crimson, looking like he'd like a cigarette if they weren't banned from Dennis's cabin. Theo catches Gale's eye with a curve to his mouth that might be a smile. No one else reacts.

# # #

Their routine doesn't change much, save for where it does.

John still picks Gale flowers on his morning jogs, but now Gale will kiss his cheek when he sees them.

Gale still washes the dishes if John cooked, but now John stands behind him, arms around his waist, to distract him by writing "Hi Buck" in soap bubbles.

They drive into town for groceries, talking about anything and everything, but now Gale lays claim to John's thigh, hand curved across its breadth.

John still has trouble sleeping, but he runs less frequently through the forest when he has Gale to wrap around. (They move the knives from under their pillows to the bedside drawers.) Flak still shocks Gale awake, but now John joins him in the bathtub, and always to Gale's right. They cram together side by side, knees hooked over its rim and shoulders pressed together. Sometimes John hands Gale a bottle of shampoo while he takes the conditioner, and they mime flying like Sammy and Billy sitting in the cockpit of a B-17.

Gale eyes John unabashed when his shirt rides up, revealing a slice of midriff, a curve of hipbone. He knows what they feel like now under his hands, his lips. John sits in the bathroom when Gale takes a shower, but rarely does he join him. Instead, he'll sit on the counter and watch, and they'll play tic-tac-toe in the steam over the mirror, catching glimpses of themselves and each other inside each X and O.

And they write letters: "Hi Bucky" on a gum wrapper slipped into John's hand. Doodles of dodo birds and unicorns inside empty cigarette packs. "Went for a swim" on the back of an old receipt, signed "XOXO, Bucky." Debates about what to make for dinner passed back and forth while they sit side by side on the sofa, reading in

silence but for the scratch of pen over paper.

One afternoon late into summer, while John is at Aurelia's for a haircut and a gossip session, Gale pulls his textbooks out of their box in the attic, where he hasn't slept in a month. He still wants to go back to school, still wants to study physics, but before now it always felt too daunting. Like trying on his old B-3 jacket, scared it'll fit too well and he'll be launched back over the Channel.

But now, sitting down at the dining room table with Steve the chicken and a bouquet of pink wildflowers in a pretty glass vase, he cracks open the spine and feels like he's just broken through clouds, the sky a cradle welcoming him home.

It's how John finds him, sauntering in with a "Honey, I'm home!" and a spring in his step. Gale hums without looking up from his notes, patting at John's hip when he presses up against Gale's side to smack a kiss on his cheek.

"Yuck," John says, chin on Gale's head, arms wrapped loose around Gale's neck. "Math."

"You love math."

"Vicious slander." He kisses his temple, then sashays into the kitchen to turn on the oven. "Gladys made us a casserole. Promised it'll spice your tongue off, white boy."

"You're white, too."

John just laughs. "You decided to go back to school, then?"

"I've always planned to. And anyway, it's not like we can stay in Ev's cabin forever."

"True. Though, fuck, wouldn't it be nice?"

Gale hums. "There's always next summer."

When John simply whistles whatever song is stuck in his head, removing the foil from Gladys's casserole to pop it in the oven to cook, Gale props his chin on his palm. He loves watching John move, the energy that crackles through him released only in small increments: the cock of his hip while he twists the nob on the timer, the spin on one heel to wash his hands at the sink, the flick of his wrist while he hangs the dishtowel back on the hook to dry. How he

blushes when he catches Gale's eye and realizes he's being observed.

"Like what you see?" John says, shy.

"Yeah," Gale says. "Think I'll take you with me."

John doesn't ask where. He just says, "That so?"

"You think I'm leavin' you behind?"

"Well, I already tried once. It didn't stick."

Smiling, Gale closes his textbook and tidies up his notes. "We'll get some little apartment. Two bedrooms, of course, but one won't be used."

"Hmm, sensible choice."

Gale gets up from the table and pushes in his chair. "You'll get some job to keep you busy while I'm in class."

"Teaching kids to fly, maybe. I've always liked those little propeller planes."

Gale smirks at the notion of John teaching rich kids in a plane like that after flying bombers in a war. "Whoever gets home first will put the roast on. Feed the dog."

"If we get a dog, we're naming it Dodo."

For every one step Gale takes into the kitchen, John takes one back until his ass hits the counter. Gale doesn't stop, and John doesn't ask him to. He simply slings an arm around Gale's waist when he's near enough and hauls him in close, pounding heart to pounding heart. John smells of clean soap and coffee and the green stuff Aurelia keeps her combs in, and when Gale kisses him, he tastes of raspberries.

"It's a cozy little picture you've painted, Buck," John murmurs.

"D'you have something else in mind?"

"No, just—" He clears his throat. If they weren't standing so close, Gale might not have even noticed the sudden tension in his shoulders, his spine. "You think it's possible to have that? To live like that?"

Gale slides his hands under John's serge shirt, spreading his palms over his back. "I think I want it badly enough to try. Dennis and Theo

have made it work. Gladys and Aurelia are certainly doing their best. I think there's more of us out there than we've realized."

"I've seen what happens when people find out, Buck. It's never pretty."

"I know." Gale presses his nose into the soft underside of John's chin. "But we survived a war already, John. We could've died any day, at any moment, from nothing more than a simple training flight gone wrong. Neither of us might have made it back, so after all that…?" He rubs his nose over John's Adam's apple, then kisses the dip of his collarbone. "I dunno, I feel like we deserve the chance to build our version of happiness out of what's left."

John's quiet, but it's the contemplative sort, eyes vacant and lips pursed, like Croz just dreamed up a Hail Mary flight plan to Scotland. Gale's watching him, so when John returns to solid ground, eyes dropping to Gale's, he's already looking back, and John smiles.

"All right," he says, plain and simple. "That's the plan."

# # #

The bed creaks with every slow roll of John's hips, Gale's hands clutching hard to John's thighs to feel each flex of muscle. Sunlight paints John's chest golden, beads of sweat losing the fight to gravity. It's the first properly hot day of the summer, and Gale woke up painfully hard, his cock nestled in the small of John's back. When John noticed Gale stirring, he simply said, "Morning, sleeping beauty," and laughed as Gale laid claim to John's body, licking up sweat and sunlight both, drunk on John's skin.

"My letter, John," Gale says now, rocking his hips up in counterpoint to John's roll downward. John groans, one hand planted on the flat of Gale's stomach, the other pushing his sweaty curls out of his face as he looks down at him, bleary-eyed. The sight alone is almost enough to undo Gale, but he's determined to hold out until John finally writes him a letter. He'd promised, after all, when they couldn't find a coin to toss to decide who'd top and started to negotiate. (It didn't take much convincing for Gale to top this time. After Gale worked John open with his tongue and a generous helping of Crisco, John was thrumming with pent-up need. Working the wiggles out by riding Gale is hardly a hardship in Gale's book.)

"Dear Buck," John finally says.

“Wrong four-letter name, John.”

John grins. Gale ceases to move. When John whines, Gale simply raises his brows.

“Dear Gale,” John says at last, “you’re so mean to me.”

Gale plants his feet and rocks up, hard, and when John squeaks, Gale says, “That so?” and abandons one of John’s thighs to palm his weeping cock. John hisses, hips stuttering, and Gale brings his thumb to his mouth for a taste. When John sees him, his pupils swallow his irises whole, and he yanks Gale’s thumb out of his mouth to replace it with his own fingers.

“No biting this time,” John all but slurs.

Gale just hums and curls his tongue between John’s index and middle fingers.

“Dear Gale,” John starts again, lips still clumsy as he stares at Gale’s mouth, “I take back what I said. God bless your oral fixation.”

Gale snorts.

“I’m so fucking glad I named you after me.”

Gale grunts and palms John’s ass with both hands, adjusting his tempo and angle just enough that he thinks he might be able to hold back a bit longer. If it also helps him find John’s prostate, makes his cock blurt precome, so much the better.

“There was a guy I knew named Buck, but he wasn’t like you. Not nearly as pretty.” John drags his thumb over Gale’s bottom lip, smearing saliva. “Certainly never did this with him. But, Jesus fuck, I like being queer with you.”

Gale knocks John’s hand away and surges up, kissing him hard. John laughs, spearing his fingers into Gale’s hair as his cock, trapped between them, smears their bellies with precome. Gale kisses him until his lips are numb, until he runs out of breath, until he doesn’t remember what it’s like to not be as close to John as is physically possible. He kisses him until John breaks it, palm to Gale’s jaw, eyes hooded and soft.

“Love, John,” he whispers, which isn’t fair, but Gale is too busy spilling inside him to complain. Then John shoves him onto his back

and rides him hard and fast until he comes all over Gale's chest, head dropped back with a laugh, but he hasn't even caught his breath before he's saying, "P.S. There's a new four-letter name for you, Buck."

"P.P.S.," Gale says, "that wasn't fair."

"P.P.P.S. Who said *you* could add a postscript to *my* letter?" John asks, planting his hands on Gale's chest to glare. It's a rather weak one, given he still looks come-drunk.

"P.P.P.P.S. I did. Didn't you recognize my voice? Now say it again, and properly."

"I love you, Buck."

Gale grins, and he laughs, and he covers his eyes with one hand, that fizzy feeling spreading through his chest, the one that usually only arrives with John singing into a microphone, making everyone regret the day he was born. John nudges Gale's hand out of the way and kisses his eyebrows and his cheeks, his forehead and his nose and his mouth, stealing Gale's laughter and sharing his own. Gale slips out of him and pushes him to his back, and they make a mess of the sheets and each other, and they take a shower, and they swim, and they fuck again, and again, and again, and Gale writes, "I love you," and "I love you," and "I love you," and he's so happy it hurts.

# # #

Gale upends the shoebox over the bed, John's letters scattering across the comforter. John, standing on the far side with his hands on his hips, looks from the mess of letters—corners torn off official forms and defaced by pencil; old brown paper bags boasting scribbles in blue crayon (Gale has no idea where John got a blue crayon while on the base); the labels torn off beer bottles with black marker scrawled across the white inside—to Gale's face.

"You kept all of them," John says.

Smiling, Gale sifts through the mess until he finds the very first. "Even this one."

John's careful as he opens it, both lips sucked between his teeth. Then he looks up at Gale, eyes framed by crinkles, red fez on his head. The tassel brushes over his curls. "I thought you'd tossed this one."

“Nah. This one’s a favorite, though,” he says and holds out a cigarette pack. “Not *the* favorite, but certainly up there.”

John doesn’t take it, but he eyes it like he knows which one it is. His lips are sucked back between his teeth. In the tank top he’s wearing, his flush is obvious. He scratches his nose and gently folds the first letter up.

“That damn unicorn,” he mutters at last.

“And other extinct animals,” Gale adds.

John huffs a soft laugh, holding up one finger and kneeling to reach under the bed. He reemerges with a carved wooden box, like one you might put cigars in, but deeper. He unlatches it, then lifts the lid until the stay catches. These letters are arranged much neater than the ones from Gale’s shoebox, though they bear the same marks of wear and tear: frayed corners, torn edges, black ink going grey.

“This one’s not *the* favorite, either,” John says at last, gently tugging a letter free. “But it’s the one I’ve reread the most ’cause it’s the one that kept me alive.”

Gale’s careful as he takes it and feels his eyes burn as he reads the tail end.

The boys set this bunk up special for you, so give them a proper “thank you” when you get here. I’ll be waiting to hear the daring dos of your capture.

Hugs and kisses,

Buck

Gale looks up. “This one, huh?”

“I didn’t—When I got to the stalag, I didn’t feel like a person anymore.” John sniffs and fetches another letter from the box. “It reminded me I am.”

Gale nods at the one whose seam John traces with the pad of one finger. “And that one?”

“My favorite. I got Crank to help me decipher what you’d crossed out.”

“You showed Crank?”

“Only the one.” John snorts, self-deprecatingly. “You know he and Brady started calling me their war widow? It was after we knew you were alive but before we were transferred to your compound in the stalag. Every time I went to see you at the fence, Crank would say, ‘There goes our war widow,’ and Brady would say, ‘Our war widow no more,’ and then they’d mime clinking glasses. Never did figure out if they saw how real it was, but if they did, they didn’t seem to mind. Not even after Crank read this one.” Then he takes a breath and holds it out.

Dear Bucky,

Thank you for telling me that much. I’ll wait until you’re ready to share the rest, but just because Lemmons isn’t here doesn’t mean you don’t have a ground crew. I know my way around a plane. And if not me, so does Brady, or Murphy, or Crank.

I’m glad you’re alive, too. I’m glad you had a good time in London and that you met a girl who helped you forget (at least, so I assume—so I hope). I’ll look for the postcard when we get back home. Maybe you can tell me what it said until then.

Thank you for the kiss, real or not.

Hugs and kisses,

Buck

P.S. No, we’re not extinct yet, Major. How can we be when we’re still here together? I can still see you. That means you’re still real, and if you’re real, so am I.

“The kisses were always real,” John says. “Every single one of ’em.”

“Even the first?” Gale asks, voice gone as thin as this paper.

“Yeah, even the first. I think Curt figured it out. Don’t think he minded, either.” Quiet footsteps make Gale take a breath and close his eyes, and he doesn’t resist when John gently nudges his chin up and kisses him. John hums when Gale kisses him back, and it sounds content, like all he needs is Gale, safe and alive and here, in nothing but his skivvies because John blushed crimson after catching Gale admiring every hickey on his chest in the mirror. John had been outside paying the man who repaired the back right tire of his pickup truck, and Gale thought he had time to admire the marks unseen.

“And Buck?” John softly thumps his forehead against Gale’s. “We’re not extinct yet.”

Gale smiles, and he sighs, and he surrenders. It’s the easiest thing he’s ever done. “How can we be when we’re still here together?”

End Notes

Did I take some liberties with Bear Lake and perhaps when certain things came into being? Maybe, but it's fanfic, so who cares. Also I live in smalltown Idaho, and all our bars are called saloons and we're not even known as the Cowboy State. I've only passed through Wyoming, but I think this habit of bar-naming would apply there, too. Also also, were those cowboys in the bar queer? You bet your ass they were.

I hope you enjoyed! Thanks so much for reading 💔 I'm spaceshipkat on tumblr. Come yell about clegan with me.

Works inspired by this one

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!